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Balancing the State and the Individual

In his writings about the state, Heinrich von Treitschke claims boldly that the state is “primordial and necessary” and is “no less essential to mankind than speech.” While the state plays a crucial role in society, it is not worthy of the high esteem Treitschke claims it deserves.

At first glimpse, Treitschke’s beliefs about the state appear to be reasonable. According to Treitschke, “the state is the people, legally united as an independent entity.” His use of the word “people” to refer to “a number of families permanently side by side” allows for a broad definition of the state. People by nature are not isolated creatures. Rather, they are designed to relate with others. Interactions between them must have some sort of bounds and must occur in the context of a larger entity than the individual. Thus, Treitschke is perfectly justified in saying that states are both a natural and necessary part of human life. Were anarchy to prevail for any length of time, it would soon be replaced after one person or group of people, likely the strongest, smartest, and/or biggest, imposed some sort of code of behavior on the rest. Even this instance fits within the bounds of this simple characterization of the state.

Treitschke delves deeper when describing the state, defining it as more than just a group of people living together. According to Treitschke, mankind’s identity as a race of human beings makes a state great. He writes, “only a creature like man, needing and

endowed with reason, can have a history.” This “law of inheritance” sets humans above all other creatures and creates a need for a state’s self-preservation. It is because man has a memory, Treitschke argues, that states can and do exist. The traditions, customs, and thoughts of one generation can be remembered, recorded, and passed on to descendants.

One would assume that since man plays an indispensable role in the state that the state exists not only for itself but also for the people of which it is composed. Rather than making man great in return for his contributions to the state, however, Treitschke claims that the state’s duty is to preserve itself. He even goes so far as to claim that man should do more for the state; he should always willingly surrender his own rights for the preservation of the state, “compelling the individual to sacrifice himself to it.” Treitschke suggests further that the state has a personality and that it is “the will of the State which is expressed, not the personal desires of the individuals who conclude them.” This demand placed on all citizens of a state to submit in all regards to that state is unreasonable, considering the fact that the state exists only because of its members. Treitschke fails to create a proper balance between the state and its citizens, leaving no room for the needs of the latter.

There is a delicate balance between a state’s needs and its people’s needs. While it is crucial that a state consider the needs of its citizens, Treitschke’s claims indeed have merit and are valid to the extent that it is vital that certain individuals of a state put the needs of the whole above their own. For example, it is a direct result of those who fought and died in the Revolutionary War that the United States exists today. Those who sacrificed their lives in the Civil War can be thanked for the abolition of slavery in the first centennial of the United States’ existence. Had no individuals been willing to

sacrifice their lives for the good of the other members of the nation, advances that benefit both the state and the individuals of the state would not have been made.

A clearer understanding of some of the pitfalls of Treitschke's extreme nationalism – of the elevation of the state over the individual – can be gained through studying Fritz Kreisler's experiences in World War I. In his story, *Four Weeks in the Trenches*, Kreisler comments, "nations naturally dwarfed the individual into nothingness" and the high regard for the whole "left practically no room for personal considerations." Regardless of how tired, hungry, sick, or hurting a man was, it was his duty to serve his country in fighting in the war. Ironically, considering the large role individuals play in a nation, the statement that they suddenly became "nothing" causes the definition of the state, which is composed of united people, to break down. To illustrate this point, consider the bricks that compose a house. The instant the bricks become nothing, they can no longer be components of a house, thus abolishing the house's existence. Alternatively, one could argue that the individuals are not actually becoming nothing, but it is the uniting of them that causes them to become something. Once again, though, this emphasis eliminates the value of each individual that composes the whole.

Kreisler further embodies Treitschke's nationalistic philosophy when he describes his unit as "the very massing together of so many individuals, with every will merged into one that serves with gigantic effort toward a common end." Setting aside each of their own personal agendas, those with whom Kreisler served united and bonded together as one force fighting for the preservation of their nation. At a superficial glance, Kreisler's actions appear honorable and worthwhile. But, he takes Treitschke's philosophy to the extreme, putting himself through all sorts of undue hardship for his

country. In addition to setting aside all personal considerations, Kreisler endures a “psychological, almost hypnotic, state of mind” through his time fighting in the war. To consider such abandonment of reason and normal human behavior as honorable and necessary assumes a skewed perception of reality.

Kreisler goes so far as to call one night of camp at a monastery “an unforgettable scene of great romanticism and beauty.” Even were the camaraderie between soldiers something to be envied, the circumstances under which such bonds existed were neither romantic nor beautiful. There are few stories of war that have been described in such pleasant terms. Even while United States citizens honor those who fought in the Revolutionary War through the Fourth of July celebration, the general consensus still is that war is unpleasant and should be avoided.

Treitschke takes the opposite approach to war, suggesting that it is one of the greatest ways a man can invest his life in the state. Further, it is not only an action that must be endured, but is one of the “chief tasks of even the most barbaric states.” Treitschke reasons that war is one of the means through which the customs, ideas, and knowledge of a nation are preserved. As one of the primary purposes of a nation, war prevents a state from becoming too stale; it provides a means of acquiring “other countries’ intellectual vigour.” Even considering the fact that interaction between nations 100 years ago might not have been as fervent as it is today, Treitschke incorrectly concludes that war is necessary for both the preservation of culture and the transmittal of ideas. With the Internet and other advances in technology that increase the free exchange of information and philosophies, it is, without a doubt, possible to attain such intellectual refreshment without war.

In the United States, rather than warring over differing cultures and beliefs, individuals are encouraged to retain their own identity and to follow their own ideals while, at the same time, giving back to the state that has provided them with the freedom to pursue life, liberty and happiness. This balance between the state and the individual creates a greater and much more powerful state than one that forces its members to set aside all their prerogatives for the whole.