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THE ECONOMIC BASIS OF THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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Whatever else it may mean in art or morals, there is no doubt whatever that in economics the word value means power in exchange and nothing more. It is the power which an article possesses of commanding other desirable things in peaceful and voluntary exchange. Why a thing has this power is the first problem in economic value.

Whether it be universally agreed to or not, it is none the less true that utility and scarcity, and these alone, are necessary to give value to a thing which is capable of being transferred. If it is *both* useful and scarce it will have value, and it will have value under no other conditions. By utility is meant the power to satisfy a want. Whether that want be fundamental or trivial, wholesome or pernicious, does not matter so far as value, or power in exchange, is concerned. The proposition that utility, or the power to satisfy a want, is essential to value becomes sufficiently obvious when it is translated into the proposition that nothing has value unless somebody wants it. By scarcity is meant insufficiency to satisfy wants. However abundant a thing may be, speaking absolutely, if there is not as much as is wanted in any time and place, it is scarce in that time and place; and however rare it may be, speaking absolutely, if there is as much as is wanted, or more, it is not scarce. The proposition that scarcity is essential to value becomes sufficiently obvious when it, in turn, is translated into the proposition that a thing has no value when everybody has as much as, or more than, he wants of it, as in the case of air. To sum up, whenever and wherever people want a thing, and want more of it than they have got, they will be willing to give something in exchange for it, and it will therefore possess value, or power in exchange, and it will possess value only under these conditions. So much by way of definition.

The question, Why do things have the power to satisfy wants? would lead us back through physiology and psychology quite to the borders of the unknowable. The question, Why are they scarce? would lead us also toward the unknowable, but by a somewhat different route. Into this philosophical hinterland of his science the economist has generally refrained from bursting lest he should be found poaching upon the preserves of the philosopher; but there are some things in this region which, when seen through the eyes of the economist, may come to have a new significance.

Of course the first and most obvious reason for the scarcity of goods is that nature has not provided them in sufficient abundance to satisfy all the people who want them. Of some things, it is true, she is bounteous in her supply; but of others she is niggardly. Things which are so bountifully supplied as to satisfy all who want them do not figure as wealth, or economic goods, because we do not need to economize in their use. But things which are scantily supplied must be meted out and made to go as far as possible. That is what it means to economize. Because we must practise economy with respect to them they are called economic goods or wealth. Toward other things our habitual attitude is a non-economic one, but toward this class of things it is distinctly economic. In fact the whole economic system of society, the whole system of production, of valuation, of exchange, of distribution, and of consumption, is concerned with this class of goods—toward increasing their supply and making the existing supply go as far as possible in the satisfaction of wants.

The fact that there are human wants for whose satisfaction nature does not provide in sufficient abundance—in other words, the fact of scarcity—signifies that man is, to that extent at least, out of harmony with nature. The desire for fuel, clothing, and shelter, grows out of the fact that the climate is more severe than our bodies are fitted to endure, and this alone argues a very considerable lack of harmony. The lack is only emphasized by the fact that it is necessary for us to labor and endure fatigue in order to provide ourselves with these means of protecting our bodies against the rigors of nature. That labor also which is expended in the production of food means nothing if not that there are more mouths to be fed, in certain regions at least, than

nature has herself provided for. She must therefore be subjugated, and compelled to yield larger returns than she is willing to do of her own accord. And that expanding multitude of desires, appetites, and passions which drive us as with whips; which send us to the ends of the earth after gewgaws with which to bedeck our bodies, and after new means of tickling the five senses; which make us strive to outshine our neighbors, or at least not to be outshone by them—these even more than our normal wants show how widely we have fallen out of any natural harmony which may supposedly have existed in the past.

That there is a deeper harmony lying hidden somewhere beneath these glaring disharmonies is quite possible. Certainly no one can positively assert that it is not so. It may be true, as some profoundly believe, that these natural discomforts, with the necessity for work which accompanies them, furnish a discipline which is necessary for our highest good. Being thus driven by a *vis a tergo* toward our own highest good, we may be in harmony with our surroundings in ways which do not appear to our immediate sense of self-interest. But this whole question lies within the field of philosophical conjecture, and nothing positive can be affirmed on either side.

Our leaning toward a theory of a deep-lying harmony is easy enough so long as we contemplate only the civilized races of the temperate zones. They are obviously better off than the tropical races, which are *apparently* less out of harmony with their environment. But our faith is likely to receive a shock when we contemplate the hyperboreans. They, if any, are under the chastening hand of nature; they, if any, are driven by hard necessity; if discipline is what men need, they have it; and yet they do not progress according to any standard which we can understand. Even the comparison of the races of the temperate zone with those of the tropics lends doubtful support to the theory, because it is by no means certain that there is any less conflict between man and nature in the tropics than elsewhere. The climate is milder, it is true, and nature is more profuse in her supply of food; but she is also more profuse in the supply of living enemies of man, and living enemies, especially the invisible ones, are quite as dangerous and as difficult to guard against

as inhospitable weather. Saying nothing of beasts of prey and venomous creatures, the hook worm, the mosquito, and the divers sorts of harmful bacteria all imperil the lives of the dwellers in the tropics quite as much as the east winds do the lives of our New Englanders. While these tropical enemies are as dangerous, they are even more difficult to guard against than those with which we have to contend. The amount of intelligence which is required to see the necessity of clothing and shelter in our climate is small as compared with that which was required to see the necessity of exterminating the mosquito, to take a single illustration, in the fever-haunted tropics. On the whole, therefore, it would be quite as easy to maintain the thesis that the civilized races are less out of harmony with their natural environment than the uncivilized races—in other words, that the most civilized races occupy those parts of the globe where the necessity for work is least—as it would be to maintain the opposite thesis. If that thesis be sound, the theory of a deep-lying harmony between man and nature could scarcely stand. The truth probably is that the more civilized races occupy those regions where the advantages to be gotten by work are most obvious to the average intelligence. This leaves us without any light whatever upon the question of an underlying harmony.

Whatever our belief upon that point may be, there is not the slightest doubt that men are sometimes cold and hungry and sick; and that these discomforts would be much more frequent than they now are, if men did not work to prevent them. But work causes fatigue. Obviously the individual cannot be expected to see in this situation any sign of a complete harmony between himself and his material environment. So far as the individual can see and understand, the lack of harmony between himself and nature is a very real one.

Viewed from this standpoint, the whole economic struggle becomes an effort to attain to a harmony which does not naturally exist. As is well known, the characteristic difference between the non-economizing animals, on the one hand, and man, the economizer, on the other, is that in the process of adaptation the animals are passively adapted to their environment, whereas man assumes the active rôle in attempting to adapt his environment

to himself. If the climate is cold, animals must develop fur or blubber; but man builds fires, constructs shelters, and manufactures clothing. If there are enemies to fight against, the animals must develop claws or fangs, horns or hoofs, whereas man makes bows and arrows, or guns and ammunition. The whole evolutionary process, both passive and active, both biological and economic, is a development away from less toward greater adaptation, from less toward greater harmony between the species and its environment.

That phase of the disharmony between man and nature which takes the form of scarcity gives rise also to a disharmony between man and man. Where there is scarcity there will be two men wanting the same thing; and where two men want the same thing there is an antagonism of interests. Where there is an antagonism of interests between man and man there will be questions to be settled, questions of right and wrong, of justice and injustice; and these questions could not arise under any other condition. The antagonism of interests is, in other words, what gives rise to a moral problem, and it is, therefore, about the most fundamental fact in sociology and moral philosophy.

This does not overlook the fact that there are many harmonies between man and man, as there are between man and nature. There may be innumerable cases where all human interests harmonize, but these give rise to no problem and therefore we do not need to concern ourselves with them. As already pointed out, there are many cases where man and nature are in complete harmony. There are things, for example, which nature furnishes in sufficient abundance to satisfy all our wants; but these also give rise to no problem. Toward these non-economic goods our habitual attitude is one of indifference or unconcern. Where the relations between man and nature are perfect, why should we concern ourselves about them? But the whole industrial world is bent on improving those relations where they are imperfect. Similarly with the relations between man and man; where they are perfect, that is, where interests are all harmonious, why should we concern ourselves about them? As a matter of fact we do not. But where they are imperfect, where interests are antagonistic and trouble is constantly arising, we are compelled

to concern ourselves whether we want to or not. As a matter of fact, we do concern ourselves in various ways; we work out systems of moral philosophy and theories of justice, after much disputation; we establish tribunals where, in the midst of much wrangling, some of these theories are applied to the settlement of actual conflicts; we talk and argue interminably about the proper adjustment of antagonistic interests of various kinds, all of which, it must be remembered, grow out of the initial fact of scarcity—that there are not as many things as people want.

That underneath all these disharmonies there is a deep underlying harmony of human interests is the profound belief of some. But this belief, like that in a harmony between man and nature, is not susceptible of a positive support. It rests upon philosophical conjecture—and faith. To be sure, it is undoubtedly true that most men, even the strongest, are better off in the long run under a just government, where all their conflicts are accurately and wisely adjudicated, than they would be in a state of anarchy, where every one who was able did what he pleased, and what he could, if he was not able to do what he pleased. This might possibly be construed to imply a harmony of interests, in that all alike, the strong as well as the weak, are interested in maintaining a just government. But the argument is violently paradoxical, because it literally means that interests are so very antagonistic that, in the absence of a government to hold them in check, there would be such a multiplicity of conflicts, wasting the energies of society, that in the end everybody would suffer, even the strongest. This is an excellent argument in favor of the necessity of government, but it is the poorest kind of an argument in favor of the universal harmony of human interests.

Fundamentally, therefore, there are only two practical problems imposed upon us. The one is industrial and the other moral; the one has to do with the improvement of the relations between man and nature, and the other with the improvement of the relations between man and man. But these two primary problems are so inextricably intermingled, and they deal with such infinitely varying factors, that the secondary and tertiary problems are more than we can count.

But whence arises that phase of the conflict with nature out of

which grows the conflict between man and man? Is man in any way responsible for it, or is it due wholly to the harshness or the niggardliness of nature? The fruitfulness of nature varies, of course, in different environments. But in any environment there are two conditions, for both of which man is in a measure responsible, and either of which will result in economic scarcity. One is the indefinite expansion of human wants, and the other is the multiplication of numbers.

The well-known expansive power of human wants, continually running beyond the power of nature to satisfy, has attracted the attention of moralists in all times and places. "When goods increase, they are increased that eat them: and what good is there to the owners thereof, saving the beholding of them with their eyes?" is the point of view of *The Preacher*. It was the same aspect of life, obviously throwing man out of harmony with nature, which gave point to the Stoic's principle of "living according to nature." To live according to nature would necessarily mean, among other things, to keep desires within such limits as nature could supply without too much coercion. Seeing that the best things in life cost nothing, and that the most ephemeral pleasures are the most expensive, there would appear to be much economic wisdom in the Stoic philosophy. But the pious Buddhist, in his quest of Nirvana, overlooking the real point—that the expansion of wants beyond nature's power to satisfy is what throws man inevitably out of harmony with nature and produces soul-killing conflicts—sees in desire itself the source of evil, and seeks release in the eradication of all desire.

Out of the view that the conflict of man with nature is a source of evil grow two widely different practical conclusions as to social conduct. If we assume that nature is beneficent and man at fault, the conclusion follows as a matter of course that desires must be curbed and brought into harmony with nature, which is closely akin to Stoicism, if it be not its very essence. But if, on the contrary, we assume that human nature is sound, then the only practical conclusion is that external nature must be coerced into harmony with man's desires and made to yield more and more for their satisfaction. This is the theory of the modern industrial spirit in its wild pursuit of wealth and luxury.

Even if the wants of the individual never expanded at all, it is quite obvious that an indefinite increase in the number of individuals in any locality would, sooner or later, result in scarcity and bring them into conflict with nature, and therefore into conflict with one another. That human populations are physiologically capable of indefinite increase, if time be allowed, is admitted, and must be admitted by any one who has given the slightest attention to the subject. Among the non-economizing animals and plants, it is not the limits of their procreative power, but the limits of subsistence, which determine their numbers. Neither is it lack of procreative power which limits numbers in the case of man, the economic animal. With him also it is a question of subsistence, but of subsistence according to some standard. Being gifted with economic foresight, he will not multiply beyond the point where he can maintain that standard of life which he considers decent. *But*—and this is to be especially noted—so powerful are his procreative and domestic instincts that he *will* multiply up to the point where it is *difficult* to maintain whatever standard he has. Whether his standard of living be high or low to begin with, the multiplication of numbers will be carried to the point where he is in danger of being forced down to a lower standard. In other words, it will always be hard for us to make as good a living as we think we ought to have. Unsatisfied desires, or economic scarcity, which means the same thing, are therefore inevitable. It is a condition from which there is no possible escape. The cause lies deeper than forms of social organization; it grows out of the relation of man to nature.

These considerations reveal a third form of conflict—perhaps it ought to be called the second—a conflict of interests within the individual himself. If the procreative and domestic instincts are freely gratified, there will inevitably result a scarcity of means of satisfying other desires, however modest those desires may be, through the multiplication of numbers. If an abundance of these things is to be assured, those instincts must be only partially satisfied. Either horn of the dilemma leaves us with unsatisfied desires of one kind or another. We are therefore pulled in two directions, and this also is a condition from which there is no

possible escape. But this is only one illustration of the internal strife which tears the individual. The very fact of scarcity means necessarily that if one desire is satisfied it is at the expense of some other. What I spend for luxuries I cannot spend for necessities; what I spend for clothing I cannot spend for food; and what I spend for one kind of food I cannot spend for some other. This is the situation which calls for economy, since to economize is merely to choose what desires shall be gratified, knowing that certain others must, on that account, remain ungratified. Economy always and everywhere means a threefold conflict; a conflict between man and nature, between man and man, and between the different interests of the same man.

This suggests the twofold nature of the problem of evil. Evil in the broadest sense, merely means disharmony, since any kind of disharmony is a source of pain to somebody. But that form of disharmony which arises between man and nature has, in itself, no moral qualities. It is an evil to be cold or hungry, to have a tree fall upon one, to be devoured by a wild beast or wasted by microbes. But to evils of this kind, unless they are in some way the fault of other men, we never ascribe any moral significance whatever. It is also an evil for one man to rob another, or to cheat him, or in any way to injure him through carelessness or malice, and we do ascribe a moral significance to evils of this kind—to any evil, in fact, which grows out of the relations of man with man. But, as already pointed out, this latter form of evil—in other words, moral evil—grows out of, or results from, the former which may be called non-moral evil. Any true account of the origin of moral evil must therefore begin with the disharmony between man and nature.

Let us imagine a limited number of individuals living in a very favorable environment, where all their wants could be freely and fully gratified, where there was no scarcity nor any need for economy. Under a harmony with nature so nearly perfect as this, there could arise none of those conflicts of interests within the individual, since the gratification of one desire would never be at the expense of some other; nor could there arise any conflict of interests among individuals, since the gratification of one individual's desire would never prevent the gratification of

another's. There being no conflict of interests either within the individual or among different individuals, there could never arise a moral problem. That would be paradise. But suppose that wants should expand, or new wants develop; or suppose that, through the gratification of an elemental impulse, numbers should increase beyond any provision which nature had made. Paradise would be lost. Not only would labor and fatigue be necessary, but an antagonism of interests and a moral problem would arise. Human ingenuity would have to be directed, not only toward the problem of increasing the productivity of the earth, but toward the problem of adjusting conflicting interests. Questions of justice and equity would begin to puzzle men's brains.

It would be difficult to find in this illustration any suggestion of original sin or hereditary taint of any kind. The act which made for increase of numbers, instead of being a sinful one, for which punishment was meted out as a matter of justice, would, on the contrary, be as innocent of moral guilt as any other. But *the inevitable consequence* of it would be the destruction of the pre-existing harmony, giving rise, in turn, to a conflict of human interests. Nor does the illustration suggest or imply any "fall" or change in human nature, but rather a change of conditions under which the same human qualities would produce different social results. Moreover, the illustration does not depend for its validity upon its historical character; that is to say, it is not necessary to show that there ever was a harmony between man and nature so nearly complete as the illustration assumes to begin with. The fundamental basis of conflict is clearly enough revealed by the illustration when it is shown to be inherent in the nature of man and of the material world about him.

This theory of the origin of evil is already embodied in a well-known story, which need not be interpreted as having a historical basis in order to have a profound meaning—more profound, probably, than its most reverent students have seen in it. Once upon a time there was a garden in which lived a man and a woman, all of whose wants were supplied by the spontaneous fruits of the earth. There was no struggle for existence, no antagonism of interests; in short that was paradise. But the gratification of a

certain desire brought increase of numbers, and increase of numbers brought scarcity, and paradise was lost. Thenceforward man was to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow. The struggle for existence had set in. Man had to contend against either natural or human rivals for the means of satisfying his wants, and every form of greed and rapacity had a potential existence. When his eyes were opened to these inherent antagonisms, that is, when he became a discernor of good and evil, of advantages and disadvantages, both near and remote, he became an economic being, an adapter of means to ends, a chooser between pleasures and pains. In short, the process of industrial civilization, of social evolution, had made its first faint beginning. The human race was caught in a network of forces from which it was never to extricate itself. It was adrift upon a current which set irresistibly outward—no man knew whither.¹

In this antagonism of interests, growing out of scarcity, the institutions of property, of the family, and of the state, all have their common origin. No one, for example, thinks of claiming property in anything which exists in sufficient abundance for all. But when there is not enough to go around, each unit of the supply becomes a prize for somebody, and there would be a general scramble, did not society itself undertake to determine to whom each unit should belong. Possession, of course, is not property; but when society recognizes one's right to a thing, and undertakes to protect him in that right, that is property. Wherever society is sufficiently organized to recognize these rights and to afford them some measure of protection, there is a state; and there is a family wherever there is a small group within which the ties of blood and kinship are strong enough to overcome any natural rivalry and to create a unity of interests. This unity of economic interests within the group is sufficient to separate it from the rest of the world, or from other similar groups among which the natural rivalry of interests persists. Saying nothing of the barbaric notion that wives and children are themselves property, even in the higher types of society it is the desire to safeguard those to whom one is bound by ties of natural affection, by sharing

¹ Cf. the article by the writer on "The Economic Interpretation of the Fall of Man," in the *Bibliotheca Sacra* for July, 1900.

the advantages of property with them, which furnishes the basis for the legal definition of the family group.

Closely associated with the right of property—as parts of it in fact—is a group of rights such as that of contract, of transfer, of bequest, and a number of other things with which lawyers occupy themselves. It would be difficult to find any question in the whole science of jurisprudence, or of ethics, or politics, or any of the social sciences for that matter, which does not grow out of the initial fact of economic scarcity and the consequent antagonism of interests among men. This reveals, as nothing else can, the underlying unity of all the social sciences, that is, of all the sciences which have to do with the relations between man and man; and it shows very clearly that the unifying principle is an economic one. Even the so-called gregarious instinct may very probably be the product of the struggle for existence, which, in turn, is the product of scarcity—the advantage of acting in groups being the selective agency in the development of this instinct. But that question, like a great many others, lies beyond the field of positive knowledge. This does not necessarily constitute economics as the “master science,” with the other social sciences subordinate to it; but it does signify that, if there is such a thing as a master science, economics has the first claim to that position among the social sciences. The economic problem is the fundamental one, out of which all other social and moral problems have grown.

Though it lies somewhat beyond the scope of the present paper, it would be interesting, nevertheless, to follow up our conclusion with an examination of the possibilities of escape from the situation which is imposed upon us by economic scarcity. The method of stoicism, or the repression of desires, now going under the name of “the simple life,” and of industrialism or the multiplication of goods, have already been mentioned. Complete escape, by either of these methods, seems to be cut off, in the first place by the refusal of desires, especially the elementary ones, to be repressed, and, in the second place, by the utter impossibility of increasing goods to a point which will provide for every possible increase in population when population is unchecked by economic motives. If economic motives continue to operate as a check upon population, that is in itself an evidence of continued scarcity.

But if they do not operate, and the procreative instincts are given free play, there is absolutely no limit to the increase of population. Any one who has ever been initiated into the mysteries of geometrical progression will not entertain the slightest doubt on this point.

But even under the conditions of economic scarcity there would be no antagonism of interests between man and man if human nature were to undergo a change by which altruism were to replace egoism. If I could develop the capacity to enjoy food upon my neighbor's palate as well as upon my own, as I have already developed the capacity to enjoy it upon the palates of my children, and if my neighbor could develop a like regard for me, obviously there could be no antagonism of interests between us on the subject of food. Let this capacity become universal, and the moral problem would be solved. That would be the Christian's Millennium. Whether this way of escape lies open or not, in other words, whether such a change in human nature is possible or not, is a problem for the psychologist or the religionist. Support for the affirmative of that question comes from a somewhat unexpected quarter, namely from the writings of the late Mr. Herbert Spencer, who must be classed among the premillenarians. The closing words of his *Principles of Sociology*, which are, in fact, the final conclusion of his whole system of Synthetic Philosophy, are as follows: . . . "On the one hand, by continual repression of aggressive instincts and exercise of feelings which prompt ministrations to public welfare, and on the other hand by the lapse of restraints, gradually becoming less necessary, there must be produced a kind of man so constituted that while fulfilling his own desires he fulfils also the social needs. . . . Long studies, showing among other things the need for certain qualifications above indicated, but also revealing facts like that just named, have not caused me to recede from the belief expressed nearly fifty years ago that—'The ultimate man will be one whose private requirements coincide with public ones. He will be that manner of man who, in spontaneously fulfilling his own nature, incidentally performs the functions of a social unit; and yet is only enabled so to fulfil his own nature by all others doing the like.'"

This conclusion differs from that of the ordinary premillenarian only in the method by which the end is to be reached. According to Mr. Spencer's argument, it is not to be by evangelization, but by the sterner process of exterminating the unsocial and preserving the social elements in the population, until the whole population is made over into a new type. The execution and imprisonment of criminals, thus preventing them from breeding more of their own kind, undoubtedly work in this direction, but they leave us a long way short of the goal. That we may approach it indefinitely seems reasonable, but that it is ever attainable, either by the method of biological evolution or of evangelization, or by both combined, is by no means a foregone conclusion. It is certainly a long way off. Meanwhile what are we to do?

We may escape from some of the worst features of the situation by working along several lines at the same time. Every improvement in the arts of production, whereby a given quantity of labor is enabled to produce a larger quantity of the means of satisfying wants, tends, of course, in some degree to alleviate scarcity. If this can be supplemented by the doctrine of the simple life, made effective especially in the lives of the wealthier classes, so much the better; for then there will be fewer wants to satisfy. If this result can be still further strengthened by a rising sense of the responsibilities of parenthood, whereby the reckless spawning of population can be checked, especially among those classes who can least afford to spawn, the discrepancy between numbers and provisions will be kept at a minimum. Again, a more widespread spirit of altruism, or even a milder and more enlightened egoism such as that which moves the farmer to take delight in the sleek appearance of his horses, or the English landlord to take pride in the comfortable appearance of his tenants and cotters, would go a long way toward softening the antagonism of interests among men.

In spite of all these methods, however, there will still be antagonistic interests to be adjudicated. The state must therefore continue to administer justice. But every improvement in our conceptions of justice, as well as in the machinery for the administration of justice, whereby a closer approximation to exact justice may be secured, will make for social peace; though the mere

adjudication of conflicting interests will not remove the conflicts themselves nor their cause. That lies deeper than legislatures or courts can probe.

These conclusions sound commonplace enough, and are doubtless disappointing to those who hope for a new earth through some engine of social regeneration. The old world is already pegging away, and has been for a very long time, upon all the plans which have been mentioned in this paper. But after all, the old world is wise—much wiser than any man, though there are some men who think otherwise.