

## BRIEFER COMMUNICATIONS.

### THE BEGINNING OF UTILITY.

In a recent paper\* I discussed the relation of economics to sociology. I tried to show that the place of economics in the hierarchy of the sciences is before that of sociology; the theories of utility and of goods being necessary pre-suppositions in any study of social relations. Professor Giddings contends that there is no independent theory of utility.† Subjective utility, cost and value are all, in his opinion, social products having sociological antecedents. Apart from association, he claims that there can be no such thing as subjective utility. He endeavors to make the theory of utility a part of sociology by showing that only under social conditions can pleasurable feeling be voluminous enough to admit of appreciable distinctions of more or less. The capacity for pleasure, it is claimed, will remain infinitesimal unless the activity of the organism is aroused through concourse, suggestion and imitation. It is assumed that if the organism experiences different degrees of utility, it will be conscious of this difference and recognize the relations existing between them.

This line of reasoning overlooks the fact that the failure to recognize degrees of utility may be due to the intensity of the pleasure, as well as to its lack of clearness and volume. A strong feeling or a passion shuts out comparison as completely as one of infinitesimal importance, just as an intense light may blind as completely as utter darkness. It does not, therefore, follow that a being with intense feelings can compare these feelings and be conscious of degrees of utility. To compare feelings a being must have the power to hold in consciousness two different feelings long enough to recognize their difference. A being which does not possess this power may enjoy every possible degree of utility without having its conduct influenced by their relations. We must, therefore, contrast sharply a capacity for intense pleasures with a power to appreciate degrees of utility. A being with a capacity for intense pleasure, may, however, act on a theory of utility as well as a being who is conscious of degrees of utility. It is, of course, a different theory of utility, and leads to another type of conduct. We are apt to think that there is only one theory of utility, because to us, as social beings, only one of the theories of utility is of importance.

\* "The Failure of Biologic Sociology," *ANNALS*, May, 1894.

† "Theory of Sociology," p. 25, Supplement to *ANNALS*, July, 1894.



When we have a number of increments of a commodity we attach but little importance to single increments. We know that if certain increments are taken away the remaining increments will satisfy our wants as completely as before. Our valuation of each increment is determined by the importance to us of the final increment. This is the well-known theory of final utility, according to which each increment of an object has the value of the final increment. A being, however, who has intense feelings, but has not the power of contrasting and comparing these feelings, will act on the theory of *initial* utility; that is, he will value each increment of an object by the importance of the first or initial increment to him. The formula of the theory of initial utility is: each increment of a commodity has the value to its possessor of the first or initial increment.

Suppose a hungry lion has captured a deer and another animal attempts to take a portion of it. The lion will resist this act fiercely. He will not reason that a small portion of the deer will satisfy his hunger and that the portion which the other animal desires will not affect him. He attaches the same importance to every portion of the deer that he attaches to the first portion he means to eat. When he has satisfied a part of his appetite his action is more moderate, but still he will resist any attempt to take a portion of the deer, with a vigor depending upon his appetite at the time. He always acts on the same theory, and values each portion of what he has left by the importance to him of the first portion of it. There is a gradual fall in the value as the hunger is satisfied, but there is no comparison of the successive states of feeling, and hence their relations to one another have no influence upon the valuation.

Suppose again, a hunter kills a deer. He cuts off a portion and gives it to his dog. He does this because he acts on the theory of final utility. He knows that a part of the deer will satisfy his appetite and that he loses nothing by giving a portion of it to his dog. The dog, however, will quarrel with any animal trying to take a part of the flesh given to him, although it may be much more than he can eat. He acts on the theory of initial utility and values each portion of what he has by the importance of the first part to him.

The difference between social and unsocial beings depends upon their theory of utility. The unsocial being adopts the theory of initial utility, and puts himself thereby in opposition to all other beings. He wants everything he sees, and he values the whole of any object by the utility of its initial increment. He regards anyone as a trespasser who invades his domain and is as hostile to him as he is to anyone trying to get a portion of his food. The peculiarities of primitive economic conditions favor the development of such beings.

Only a few favored localities have free food in abundance, and success in the struggle for existence depends upon the monopolization of these localities. The theory of initial utility aids a being in such a struggle, as it causes him to attach more importance to the exclusive possession of food and locality than he would otherwise attach to them. It promotes contest and activity, and thus leads to a more rapid development of function and desire. The increase of desire localizes a being still more. It causes him to reject the less edible kinds of food, thus reducing the variety of his diet and narrowing the region in which it can be found. So long as these conditions continue there is an increased adjustment to the local environment and a growing opposition in the interests of individuals. Social progress is impossible without a new theory of utility and other economic conditions.

Not only are intense feelings a characteristic of the pre-social state, but an appreciation of degrees of utility is also necessary before toleration, the first step in the social state, is possible. Beings must be conscious of the fact that additional quantities of articles have less importance to them than the first portion before they will tolerate the presence of other beings. They must associate the consumption of other individuals not with the initial increments of what they have, but with the final increments. Each being thinks of the others as consuming those portions of commodity which have little or no value to him. The conscious opposition between beings is thus reduced to a minimum and the favorable effects of association are allowed their due weight. Furthermore, the pain connected with driving others away from the locality and food becomes greater than the pain of losing the final increments of the food supply. The consciousness of degrees of utility and the acceptance of the theory of final utility thus opens the way for social activity.

Subjective cost, however, is of much later origin and has social antecedents. Professor Giddings speaks of the pain, weariness, terror and physical mutilation which accompany success in the struggle for existence as though they were costs.\* This is an error. True cost is not the pain that accompanies the struggle for food or its consumption, but rather the pains due to endeavors to increase the food supply. Costs arise only when acts of production begin. They are not the whole of the pains of existence, but only those that are consciously undergone for the purpose of increasing the supply of commodities. They can arise only when the growth of social instincts has caused individuals to give up the struggle for the free goods of the local environment and has led them to co-operate in the better

\* *Op. cit.*, page 28.

utilization of the general environment where conscious effort will give a greater surplus, even though true costs have now become a factor in the calculations of individuals.

When Professor Giddings says that man has "an enormously greater capacity for pleasure than any rival,"\* he evidently has total utility and not initial utility in mind. So also when he says, "Pleasure admits of indefinite increase, pain of indefinite decrease," he is thinking of the total quantity of pleasure and pain and not of the intensity of any particular variety of pleasure or pain. His argument, however, demands that the intensity of pleasure be increased by social action. He must show that the capacity for pleasure would remain infinitesimal but for social conditions. Social forces do undoubtedly increase total utility, but they do it not by increasing the intensity of the initial utility, but by raising the utility of the subsequent increments. The laws of variety and harmony of consumption produce this result in spite of the lowering of the initial utility which accompanies social progress. A high initial utility and a large total utility are not in harmony. The one indicates primitive and the other advanced social conditions.

It is easy to exaggerate the importance of association and co-operation by overlooking the abundance of free goods which certain localities afford to primitive unsocial beings. The struggle for the possession of these regions develops intense pleasures, but prevents any marked increase of total utility. Toleration, association and imitation belong to a later stage of development when degrees and sums of utility are objects of conscious calculation. Production can then begin; true costs arise and the amount of the surplus instead of the mere intensity of pleasure determines action. These forces cause beings to utilize the general environment instead of to struggle for the possession of a favorable local environment. There is a loss of the free goods which the local environment might afford to a few individuals, but it is more than compensated by the increase in total utility which the new conditions afford. Society begins when the economic tendencies favor an adjustment to the general environment and thus make the surplus of the whole society instead of that of certain individuals the determining element in the struggle for existence.

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#### PRESENT CONDITION OF SOCIOLOGY IN THE UNITED STATES.

In a discussion of the present condition of sociology in this country, we must not confound sociology with social problems. Social problems are questions growing out of abnormal social relations. Sociology

\* *Op. cit.*, page 28.