

ARTICLE V.

THE ECONOMIC INTERPRETATION OF THE
FALL OF MAN.

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ONE of the first things learned by the student of comparative religion is the broad distinction between nature religions and ethical religions; the former based on a theory of nature and the latter on a theory of good and evil. Since the former attempt to account for the phenomena of physical nature, and the latter for the existence of evil, it is natural that the former should offer us charms and incantations against the powers of nature, and that the latter should offer us a plan of salvation from sin.

The failure to observe this fundamental distinction, together with the failure to remember that our religion belongs to the class of ethical religions, has led to some popular misapprehensions concerning the opening chapters of Genesis. At the outset of this discussion, it is necessary to recall the fact that the story of the Fall is simply an account of the entrance of evil into the world, and not an attempt to furnish scientific information about the material universe. The theory of evil there presented may be tested by some of the results of recent economic analysis.

It ought, perhaps, to go without saying, that the word "evil," as here used, has no connection with physical pains or calamities. If lightning strikes a man, or a tree falls on him; if a wild beast devours him, or microbes waste his tissues, the results are regarded as evil from another standpoint. But from the standpoint of ethics or an ethical religion such events have no moral quality. For such things

the Scriptures offer no explanation, and from them they offer no salvation. The evils we have to account for are in man's heart, or in his social surroundings. Evil, in the broadest sense, may be said to be a lack of adjustment to a man's environment. In the sense in which we use the term, it means a lack of adjustment to that part of one's environment which consists of other men. This is still a broader term than "sin," which implies a knowledge of moral qualities and a consciousness of guilt.

For evils of this kind we must find the occasion in an antagonism of interests, real or supposed, among mankind. It may be that, in a broad philosophical sense, the real interests of all men harmonize. But in order to support such a doctrine a somewhat specialized philosophical definition of self-interest has to be adopted. The undoubted fact is, that, as men understand their own interests, these interests are not always harmonious. So far as men can understand their own needs, two men frequently *need* the same thing, when only one can have it. It may be essential to the preservation of life, and the man who fails to get it must perish. It takes a good deal of philosophy to prove that it is for the interests of the one to die for want of the article in question, and for the interest of the other to possess it and survive, especially when to the former it seems that his need for it transcends every other interest. So long as their interests seem to them to conflict so radically, men will have trouble getting along together, and there will be evil in the world. On the other hand, it would be difficult to conceive of a community of men living in strife and enmity, when their interests were all harmonious.

Justice is nothing more nor less than a working principle upon which antagonistic interests are to be adjusted in the best conceivable manner. In the practice of the most civilized nations, it is that working principle upon which antagonistic interests may be so adjusted as to se-

cure the most happiness and the least unhappiness to all concerned. When a dispute is settled on any other basis; when, for example, the stronger party to a controversy wins his case because he is the stronger, or because he is smoother in flattery, or on any other ground than this general working principle,—there is said to be injustice.

But, what is the basis of this antagonism of interests which we have seen to be at the bottom of the problem of evil? Men do not usually quarrel over that which no one wants. Where a quarrel exists, it is pretty certain to grow in some way out of the fact that more than one want the same thing. Under ordinary conditions, air and sunlight are not the objects of dispute, because, under ordinary circumstances, each individual can have all he wants without depriving any one else. But when conditions arise where there is not enough to go around, even air and sunlight become the objects of disputes. In well-watered countries, the ownership of the water in streams does not give rise to a great deal of litigation; but in the arid States of the West that becomes a matter of primary importance. The law of riparian rights forms a very important part of the jurisprudence of such regions, and gives rise to endless litigations, quarrels, and even bloody feuds. It seems, then, that unsatisfied wants, or wants the means for whose satisfaction nature does not provide in sufficient abundance, give rise to this antagonism of interests, which accounts so largely for our social troubles.

A little thought at this point will convince us of the importance of a careful study of some of the fundamental concepts of political economy, as a preliminary to any attempt at the solution of the problem now before us. Wealth, as generally understood, includes only those things which have value. Value is a quality which results from utility and *scarcity*. That is to say, a thing must be both useful and scarce or it will have no value. It is that word

"scarcity" which connects economics with the problem of evil. No matter how useful a thing may be, no one thinks of making property of it unless it happens also to be scarce, that is, unless there is too little of it to satisfy all who want it. It has no value; that is, no one will give anything for it, nor go to any trouble to get it, unless there is less of it at hand than some one wants. It is only when men want more of a thing than they have that they set a value or price upon it. Since wealth and value involve the idea of scarcity and the existence of unsatisfied wants, and these in turn involve the antagonism of interests, which is the basis of most of the evil in this world, it is easy to see how large a part wealth plays in the problem of evil. A very good thing may be the source of much trouble. I would like to suggest, as an experiment in exegesis, that some one should try it and see what can be made of the familiar passage, "The love of money is the root of all evil," by putting the emphasis on the word "root," rather than on the word "love."

The existence of an unsatisfied want, or a want for which nature has not provided ample means of satisfaction, is the primary social fact. Around this fact cluster the kindred sciences of economics, jurisprudence, and politics. I believe that ethics also has a very direct interest in it. The discussion of the relation of this fact to our common social life, in its various phases, shows more clearly than anything else the essential unity of all the social sciences. In this fact we find the primary industrial force. Here we discover the motive which has produced our industrial civilization. Here we find the basis of social organization and the origin of questions of equity and justice, rights and obligations. Moreover, the serious philosophical thought of all ages has recognized in this fact the origin of the problem of evil. The Epicurean found the source of evil in his warring members, in having to suppress one set of

inclinations, and to hold others in check, in order that certain special ones might be gratified. His remedy was to get rid of this conflict by giving all his inclinations free play, and treating them all alike. The Stoic found the source of evil in the lack of harmony between man and nature, in the fact that human desires ran beyond the power of nature to satisfy. The remedy lay in the suppression of these desires, so that they might not run beyond the means which nature had provided for their satisfaction; or, what amounts to the same thing, directing his desires toward those things whereof nature was bountiful rather than toward those things whereof nature was niggardly. Observing that nature was bountiful of the means for satisfying his intellectual, moral, and æsthetic desires, but niggardly of the means for the satisfaction of the animal appetites, and especially the social wants, he conceived that living according to nature was suppressing the lower wants and cultivating the higher.—And he wasn't so far wrong as might be supposed. The pious Hindu goes yet farther, and seeks complete blessedness in the complete eradication of all desires.

Plato, in a well-known passage in his "Republic,"¹ recognizes the general fact that the fundamental evil in this world is the antagonism of interests.

"And can there be any greater evil than discord and distraction and plurality where unity ought to reign? or any greater good than the bond of unity?"

"There cannot.

"And there is unity where there is community of pleasures and pains—where all the citizens are glad or sorry on the same occasions?"

"No doubt.

"Yes; and where there is no common, but only private feeling, that disorganizes a state—when you have one-half of the world triumphing and the other sorrowing at the same events happening to the city and the citizens?"

"Certainly.

¹ Bk. v. p. 288 (Jowett's trans., Charles Scribner & Co., 1871).

"Such differences commonly originate in a disagreement about the use of the terms 'meum' and 'tuum,' mine and thine?"

"Exactly."

The practical workaday world, however, does not trouble itself with fine distinctions and subtle analyses, but assumes that what man wants he might as well have. Accordingly it sets about the work of getting it. If nature does not furnish it in sufficient abundance, the quickest way out of the difficulty is not in the suppression of the desire for it in stoical fashion, but in going to work to help nature to produce it. Hence our industrial civilization.

Once upon a time there was a garden in which lived a man and a woman all of whose wants were satisfied by the fruits of the garden. That was paradise. There was no struggle for existence, no antagonism of interests. After a time a want developed which they were not free to gratify, and paradise was lost. It matters little whether this loss came through a new expansion of human wants beyond the spontaneous fruits of nature, or whether it came through the gratification of that appetite which tends toward overpopulation and consequent scarcity of the means of subsistence, since the effect would be the same in either case. The mere fact that there were more wants than could be freely satisfied would produce an antagonism of interests among the subsequent population, and evil would have entered the world. Let us suppose that those desires were gratified which tend to overpopulation. Sooner or later the means of subsistence must have become scarce and difficult to get. Thenceforward man was to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow. The struggle for existence had set in. Men had to contend with one another for the means of satisfying wants, and every form of greed and rapacity had a potential existence. When man's eyes were opened to the inherent antagonism between population and the food

supply, he became an economic being, that is, a discerner between that which brings good and that which brings evil, between pleasures and pains. He became one who adapts means to ends. Thorns and thistles became his antagonists, and he had to root them out to give place to the herbs which would satisfy his desires. The lower animals contended with him for the possession of the land, and they had to be exterminated or subdued. Property, and distinctions between *meum* and *tuum*, came into existence when men had even to contend with one another for the means of subsistence. In short, the mighty process of industrial civilization had set in. The human race had begun a movement from which there was no turning back. It was caught in a network of forces from which it could not disentangle itself. Adrift on a current which set irresistibly outward, toward a goal which prophecy alone could foresee. In a word, social evolution had begun.

The fall of man was thus the beginning of his rise; for, with the fall, came the struggle for existence, and all those contentions, rivalries, and antagonisms which we call evil. Thus evil entered the world. But through these same rivalries and antagonisms, through this struggle for existence, comes the possibility of a higher development of society and a positively moral condition of the race to take the place of that non-moral condition of animal innocence in which the race began its career.

It is now evident, I hope, that evil can be eradicated only by harmonizing human interests. Can this come about by a return to the state of paradise, where all wants are satisfied, so that there is nothing left for men to quarrel about? It seems not. What with the well-known expansive power of human wants, so that, as riches increase, they are increased that have them, it does not seem probable that human ingenuity can so increase the production of goods, or stoical philosophy so reduce human wants, as

to bring back that condition. But more than that, there is within man's own nature an inherent antagonism between those desires which multiply population and those which demand food. For every increase in population makes increased demands upon the reservoirs of nature, and with each increased demand comes increased resistance from nature. (Students of economics will understand readily enough that I refer to the law of diminishing returns from land.) Driven by a law of its own nature, humanity must move as by an irresistible impulse away from its pristine condition.

But is there then no hope of release from the struggle? Is humanity to strive eternally with itself and with nature? Is the whole process of social evolution a perpetual and fruitless labor? Does the classic story of Sisyphus, doomed eternally to the labor of rolling a stone upward only to have it fall again, correctly represent the process of civilization and decay?

Though human interests must be harmonized before evil is eradicated, and though it does not seem possible to bring this about by providing for the complete satisfaction of all wants, so that there will be nothing left to quarrel about, yet there does seem to be another way open.

With the growth of ethical ideas, and the development of the individual, comes increased power to project one's feelings into the experiences of others; and herein lies a hopeful possibility. If I have developed this power until I can get more pleasure out of the taste of an apple upon the palate of a neighbor who is hungrier than myself, than upon my own, and if he entertains the same feelings toward me, manifestly we could not quarrel over an apple. If every one feels that way toward every one else, not only on the subject of apples, but in regard to everything, human interests will have been harmonized, and evil eliminated.

But is there any possibility that this can be accomplished? From two widely different sources we have authority for so believing. In the first place, few will deny that this is the ideal set before the world by Him who spake as never man spake, and that the evangelization of the world means ultimately the attainment of just that condition. But this, I take it, is so well understood as to need no discussion. Significantly enough, this hope is supported by a somewhat unexpected ally, namely, Mr. Herbert Spencer, who, since the publication of the third volume of his "Principles of Sociology"—the concluding volume of his stupendous work, "The Synthetic Philosophy"—must be classed among the premillenarians. His final conclusion as to the outcome of the process of social evolution is pretty accurately summed up in the following words: There must eventually be produced "a kind of man so constituted that, while fulfilling his own desires, he fulfils also the social needs." "The ultimate man will be one whose private requirements coincide with the 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 to so fulfil his own nature by all others doing the like."

The forces at work driving society in this direction are not difficult of apprehension by the student who is at all familiar with the literature of evolution. They are simple, but it is necessary for us to insulate our minds from the social forces which play about us, and look upon them and study them as parts of a vast cosmic process, from which we ourselves are for a time abstracted.

There can be no doubt in the mind of the general observer that the unsocial individual, whose desires and tastes run counter to those of society; has a harder time getting along in the world, and is at a disadvantage as compared with the social individual, whose interests harmonize with

those of the society in which he lives. Accordingly, the unsocial individual will tend toward extinction, and the social individual's chances of survival will be greater. This will tend, in the long run, to produce a type of man whose interests harmonize with those of society. Moreover, as between two social groups, that one will have the better chance of survival, other things equal, in which there is the greater harmony of interests among the individuals composing it. And this for two reasons: in the first place, the aggregate of energy expended will be greatest where there is greatest freedom of individual action, where there is least repression and hedging about by legal restrictions. In the second place, where there is greatest harmony between the motives and acts of individuals, there is the least waste of energy in friction, in antagonism, and rivalries; just as there is less waste of power in a machine all of whose parts work harmoniously together, than in one whose separate parts are out of harmony. Therefore, the strongest possible society is one whose individuals are left free to follow their own inclinations, but whose inclinations will lead them to promote the good of the whole. That, according to the new gospel of individualism, is the kind of a society which is destined finally to emerge from the fierce struggle of men and nations.

From a primitive state where evil was absent, not because men were perfect, but because the objective motives to evil were absent; through the fiery trials of want and the bitter fight for existence where the forces drive men to union and coöperation, remorselessly exterminating those who refuse to unite and coöperate; up into a higher state where harmony is restored, not by removing the objective motives to evil, but by removing the subjective motives,—the narrow, perverse, and querulous instincts,—such is the course of human development, the process of social evolution. Whether this consummation shall come through evan-

gelization, or through natural selection by the extermination of the unsocial elements, we need not quarrel. But, be assured that, whether the work of evangelization is well or ill done will make only a difference in time. If it is well done, harmony may be restored with less extermination. As the natural body throws off its waste and useless parts, so the social body sloughs off its unfit elements. And through this process of eliminating the unfit, the world will be made better whether it is evangelized or not. But if the evangelizing forces are kept at work, much of the relentless cruelty of nature's process will be rendered unnecessary. Drunkards, for example, will continue to perish miserably, leaving the temperate in possession of the earth, whether temperance reforms flourish or not, but temperance reforms, if successful, will greatly reduce the suffering inflicted by nature in her remorseless crusade against intemperance, by rendering such a process of extermination unnecessary. Thus in many different ways is natural selection aiming at the same social perfectibility which the apostles of Christianity have long proclaimed as the ultimate goal of human progress.