

COMPETITION AND CO-OPERATION.

THE Competition which I am to discuss in this paper is that which has production and trade for its sphere. It may be convenient to look at this competition in a rudimentary form. Let us imagine a few pioneers in a new country. *A* has some corn to spare, and would like to have some wool; two other men, *B* and *C*, have some wool to spare, and would like to have some corn. *B* offers so much wool for so much corn; *C* offers more wool for the same quantity of corn. *B* has to consider whether it is worth his while to offer a little more wool than *C*, or to do without the corn and keep the wool. That is an illustration of what is often called the law of competition or the competitive system. I take the following words from a recent speech made by a Parliamentary representative¹ of the Labour Party: "I am firmly convinced that Christianity is impossible under the competitive system." The same speaker denounced "the inhuman law of competition," and insisted that the hunger of men and women and children would more or less speedily abolish it. That is, competition is treated as a system, as a plan or policy which has been adopted and which can be changed,—as we could abolish Free Trade, and bring back Protection. But competition, it must be evident, comes by nature; it is not an artificial system, it is not a law imposed by capitalists; it is what human beings tend to do everywhere as a matter of course.

That is a fact which it is important to realize. To abolish a natural instinct, an elementary and universal form of human activity, is a different thing from substituting one policy for another. To root out competition from the human world looks as if it would be quite impossible; in forming plans for restricting or partially superseding competition

¹ Mr. Pete Curran, Nottingham, Sept. 6.

it is well to bear in mind that we are dealing with what springs out of human nature. Competitive action is a form of that struggle for existence, of that endeavour to attain what is desired and to escape from what is disliked, to which philosophers trace the whole unconscious evolution of the created world ; it is an activity which may be kept within bounds by the charge " Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further ! " but which, though you may expel it with a fork, will persist in returning. The human race has in it a force or impulse which will be always seeking advantage with a natural appetite or hunger, and will therefore always desire to make advantageous exchanges.

But competition means, it may be urged, that one person gets an advantage which he hinders another from getting, whilst Christianity and human welfare bid men feel and act not as competitors, but as brothers and equals. A few thinkers, impelled by this opposition, and determined to hold a principle consistently, have exclaimed against the folly and madness of practices by which we stimulate, instead of doing our utmost to repress, the competitive impulse. They point to the educational methods at work everywhere ; they show how pupils are encouraged to strive against each other for places, and prizes are profusely offered for competition. " Here," they complain, " is an activity—call it a natural instinct if you please—which is opposed to Christianity and human welfare ; and you, who profess to be Christians and to desire the welfare of mankind, are setting yourselves to foster this instinct to the utmost of your power, and to bring up your boys and girls from their tenderest infancy as competitors ! " Here and there an attempt has been made to conduct education on a non-competitive plan, but with singularly little success in attracting imitation. In education, it is an eccentricity to contend that Christianity is impossible under the competitive system.

This is surely a remarkable fact, if those are right who say that competition must be expelled from trade and industry because it is essentially opposed to Christianity and human well-being. I do wonder, indeed, that we have not a party, at least as strong as that of the anti-vaccinationists, advocating the expulsion of competition from all studies and games. That there is no such party is due to the fact that studies and games and other enterprises, purged of the spice of competition, would be found very flat; supported by this other fact, that Christian or brotherly feelings, the most warm and sincere, are not only possible, but are known to be common and easy, between competitors. The closest friendships are continually growing up between rivals at school and college. If a master or tutor were asked, "Must not the mere contention between two youths who are striving against each other to obtain some prize have of necessity or naturally an unfavourable influence upon the mutual feelings of each towards the other?" what answer would he give? I think he would reply, that any imaginable or possible feeling of that kind, natural as it might appear to be, is overpowered by forces which hold it effectually in check; by a sense of what is honourable, by a spirit of the body, by a tradition of mutual duty and regard, by the Christian affections, by all the unnoticed impacts and influences of that Divine Providence which intends human beings to be joined together in a happy social order. He would add, I take it, that as a matter of experience education would not get on so well without competition; that the striving for success seems to have a place appointed for it in the course of things; that animation and progress depend at least in part upon it; that, if it were not recognized and brought into the open air and daylight, it would work in a covert and disorderly fashion; that it may be regarded as a force intended not to rule but to be harnessed,

and so to do good work. Look where we will throughout Christendom, we see prizes increasingly offered for the purpose of stimulating competition, without an audible protest or the faintest misgiving.

But in industry and trade, it will be urged by those who would abolish competition as an anti-Christian and inhuman law; freedom to bargain may result, and does actually to some extent result, in the starving of those who are worsted in the struggle. All arguments, it is insisted, must yield to this overwhelming consideration. Men and women and children must have food and clothing and shelter found for them as a right, and must be relieved from anxiety about these necessities of life. No traditions or laws must be allowed to stand in the way of this provision. Competition must be swept aside. Liberty must be given up, in order that fraternity and equality may prevail. The comforts of life must be distributed freely amongst all. Every genuine Christian ought to work for this revolution, and must insist that men shall labour, not against one another but in concert.

All English people are agreed that no one shall find starvation inevitable in this country. The only question which divides us is, on what conditions those who cannot support themselves should be supported. Not only should we all wish that every one should enjoy ease and comfort; we should be willing, I am sure, to make great changes for the sake of securing that end. But liberty, we cannot but feel, has its value. To abolish competition is to abolish freedom of exchange; and to abolish freedom of exchange is to abolish ownership. We cannot easily imagine ourselves not owning anything; we cannot easily imagine ourselves receiving our food and clothes and houses, and our appointed task of work, from the officials of the community. It is hardly worth while, it may well be thought, to talk of anything so extreme. I do so, because any attempt to abolish

the law or system of competition as inhuman and anti-Christian leads straight to that extremity of dependence and subjection.

Let us have—it is often said—Co-operation instead of Competition. Let us have—I would say—Co-operation, not in place of Competition, but to keep Competition in its place.

Co-operative Societies, for distribution and production, have proved themselves of great value. To belong to a store is advantageous to purchasers ; it encourages carefulness and providence ; it gives its members some experience and understanding of what trade is ; it fosters a sense of responsibility. Productive co-operation is more ambitious, and has been found much more difficult, than distributive ; and it also has a higher moral and social value. Both kinds secure that the interests of the workers shall at least be sympathetically considered. But co-operative societies do not abolish competition ; they begin by adding to it ; it is a charge often brought bitterly against them, that they compete unfairly with existing interests. When a co-operative society becomes a very large concern, it may claim to diminish competition by superseding a certain number of small competitors. But competition on a larger scale remains. Prices, including wages or the prices of labour, are still everywhere substantially determined by competition. An attempt to regulate prices arbitrarily cannot be carried through without abolishing possession or ownership. Modifications of prices, due to feelings other than the instinct of acquisition, are, it is true, quite possible : a wage-payer may choose and be able, for example, to pay rather higher wages than those of the market. But such modifications are delusive if they are taken as proving that by a further extension of the Co-operative system we could introduce an arbitrary arrangement of prices or exchanges which would

not destroy ownership. I admit that the State may do a great deal in the field of exchange. It has made letter-carrying a monopoly, with very arbitrary prices ; it might, if it pleased, carry letters for nothing. The State might obtain possession of all the railways, and make travelling free. But to do this, it would have to take the cost of doing it from public resources, and to pay prices fixed by competition. It might undertake to maintain all children, and to remunerate mothers ; but, similarly, the taxpayers or ratepayers would have to contribute the means, and their contributions would be spent in the markets of the world.

But, though no conceivable extension of co-operative societies would abolish competition, the co-operative spirit may modify competition and its effects in a most beneficial degree.

The competitive impulse may be likened, I would suggest, to the bodily appetites. The instinct of acquisition which is the competitive force, seems to rank with the cravings of the body. All sorts of opprobrious language may be applied to the desires of the flesh ; that has indeed been done, freely : but we do not see how the human world could go on without them. We do not exalt hunger to supremacy ; but we recognize it, and do not denounce it as anti-Christian. Our sense of the evil of drunkenness and gluttony and selfish love of pleasure does not set us upon attempting to abolish the natural appetites : nor, I may add, does it hurry us to the conclusion that men and women and children must indulge them only under the public doctor's supervision. We hold that, in Christians and civilized beings, the bodily desires are to be kept in subjection and governed. And we see that they can be. They are ruled and guided by self-restraint and wisdom of the most various degrees : but only the most abject members of civilized societies allow their appetites to exercise unbridled tyranny over them.

I have dwelt upon the similar assumption that is universally made with regard to the competitive impulse as it operates in a large part of human life. We are no more averse to this instinct, and have no more thought of abolishing it, in education, or recreation, or in the promotion of any sort of human attainment, than we set ourselves to eradicate hunger and thirst as noxious weeds from the human body. But we do take for granted that the competitive instinct is not to exercise authority over the action of competitors. They by nature desire to be before others and to win ; but they have higher principles of conduct than the impulses of nature ; and they know and confess that it is by these higher principles that their life is to be guided.

And may we not apply the same rule of judgment to all business dealings ? may we not assume that the competitive instinct, which is in this department the desire to exchange advantageously things which we produce or possess, will survive, and will have some useful work to do, and that the wheat of liberty is not to be pulled up with the tares of selfishness and inhumanity ; but that the spirit of humanity and co-operation is to keep the natural hunger of competition firmly under control, and to do its utmost, in the sphere of the mutual dealings of men, to bring about the general happiness which the Christian spirit cannot but desire ?

Already the divine principle of brotherhood has asserted itself decisively in the sphere of exchange, and with advantages which no one dreams of questioning. Through laws such as prevail in all civilized countries, and which are enforced by coercive penalties, that principle expresses what is defined as fraud. Laws which forbid fraudulent practices are a witness that human beings are not sent into the world to be at war with each other. Their nature may move them to compete with one another, but they must compete upon strict conditions. The desire to make advantageous ex-

changes is sternly warned that it must observe legal rules of fair dealing. Human societies are plainly justified in adding to these existing laws any others that they deem advisable for the protection of their interests from selfish greed.

Law and its penalties, as we all (unless we are Tolstoyans) believe, are of great strength and value ; we cannot imagine life going on without them. But law may also be pronounced weak through its being limited to outward and definite acts and to outward punishments. Law may prevent a man from stealing ; but it cannot make him brotherly in mind or loyal to the spirit of membership.

But the interests of society and the experience of life have always been pleading for the principle of membership ; and our Christian calling with simple directness makes this principle the rule of conduct for Christians. Our neighbours are to us fellow-members of the Divine Family, of the Body of Christ. And when are we to remember our calling and to be resolutely loyal to it, if not when there is a special risk of our being inconsiderate and selfish, and when the want of humanity may do grievous harm ; that is, when we are engaged in bargaining, and are going through the processes of production and trade ?

It would seem that in this department of human life Christian society has hitherto been rather specially slow to recognize the duty and the ideal which its calling sets before it. Selfishness makes everywhere a persistent fight against the spirit of membership ; and it has sought to persuade men that there is some intended separation between religion and the occupations of buying and selling. No doubt the subordinating of the whole industrial and trading world to the spirit of membership is a very difficult task ; it requires discernment and wisdom as well as disinterestedness. There is a mysterious law of Divine Providence which ordains that

the simplest impulses of human kindness shall be sternly bidden to restrain themselves, and insists that those who wish to relieve need shall pause and reflect. We are driven by experience into the wondering conviction that, if all Christians who have more were to resolve to share their possessions with those who have less, they would do harm rather than good. The ideal of a society thoroughly animated by the spirit of membership calls for a great deal of thinking and much readiness to listen to the voice of experience, which is the voice of God. The benevolent are bidden by a solemn monition to hold their benevolent impulses in check : but this Divine restraint does not mean that the impulses are to be killed out ; it means, on the contrary, that they are to be made more sturdy and stronger, and are to cherish and work for higher aims than that of appeasing the pain of sympathy.

In this age of ours Christendom is hearing a call from heaven, stirring it to a new and noble ambition, and pointing to fresh fields of conquest. It is evident that the conquest will involve some modifications of the existing industrial and commercial organism, and that loyal Christians are bound to take courage and not to be too afraid of change. A more prevailing spirit of membership will be aware of new dangers to be met, and will not be content to leave our present customs and regulations unaltered. But it is also pressed upon us that we must advance thoughtfully and cautiously in the path of economic reform, feeling our way tentatively when we cannot see it clearly ; and that we must keep the higher aims in view, and not assume that the one thing we have to do is to provide summarily for the bodily comfort of every human being. It seems likely enough, does it not ? that nations may have to learn a similar lesson to that which individuals, who have assumed that kindness required them to give to him that asked, have had to learn,

—that it is possible to lower those to whom you intend to be kind.

A high and living spirit of membership—that is what the Christian ought both to welcome into himself, and also to stimulate and cherish in his fellow-members.

This being our duty, we have to be on our guard against methods and proceedings which would weaken independence and the sense of responsibility. Those of us who are able to keep ourselves, and to look after wives and children and parents, may sometimes consider with advantage whether *we* should like to belong to a class dependent on public maintenance and management, and exempted from the anxieties of freedom. The flesh-pots of Egypt may at times be tempting ; but the worthy life of the true member seems to be bound up with duty, and striving, and the exercise of intelligence, and sacrifice. Man lives not by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. And if some are to be independent and others dependent, will not the dependent constitute a lower—one might almost say, a servile—class ? and ought we not to have misgivings about creating a lower class, hopelessly inferior to our own ?

If we are to reverence the words of Christ, nothing can be more certain than that He sets, for His disciples, spiritual good above the bodily needs. The needs of the body He recognizes : “ Your heavenly Father knows that ye have need of all these things.” He gave those simple precepts of kindness and unworldliness which seem to bid us part with all that we have to feed the poor, and trust to be fed like the birds and clothed like the flowers. But He emphatically gave the first place to the kingdom of God, that is, the ideal spiritual society : “ Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness ; and the things of the body, the things which the Gentiles seek, will be added to you.” Aim primarily at a brotherhood of spiritual members, of men with living wills

growing into conformity and fellow-work with the Divine Will ; and whatever is wanted by men who are made of bodies as well as souls will not be withheld. That is the teaching, that the promise, of Him whom we Christians own as Master and Lord.

It is possible, it has been found nobly possible, to produce, to trade, to compete, without forgetting that we are called by our heavenly calling to honour all men, to help each other, to control and repress self, to be slaves not to Mammon but to the heavenly Father of us all.

There are in this loud stunning tide
Of human care and crime
With whom the melodies abide
Of the everlasting chime ;
Who carry music in their heart
Through dusky lane and wrangling mart,
Plying their daily task with busier feet
Because their secret souls a holy strain repeat.

To seek to do by laws what laws can do to make life more regular and worthier for all is work upon which the best hearts and intellects may fitly employ themselves. But in all things and in all times the spirit is greater than law, and will do for those who honour it what law was not designed to do. We have bright hopes to encourage us : England is a much better place, town and country, for a poor man to live in than it was when I was young. There is not much more, I feel, to be desired than that the progress of the working people should in the next half century equal what it has been in the last.

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