

THE PHILOSOPHY (NOT THE ECONOMICS) OF SOCIAL SECURITY

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HISTORY is full of examples of the harm done to society by attempts of well-meaning people to force a sudden change where there should be a gradual evolution. The validity of the assumptions underlying Social Security programmes is seldom if ever examined. The philosophy of the would-be reformers is seldom questioned.

Historically, when the underlying philosophy of a nation or a race was unsuited to their day and generation, their arts and sciences failed; the vital energy of the people seemed to diminish, and their civilization was over-run by a rougher and more virile barbarism. Similar things could happen to us. Are not our present difficulties due in part to the change which had occurred in some of the underlying philosophies of the Anglo-Saxon race,—a change which made it possible for the evil doers to flourish?

What led to the decadence and ultimate downfall of the Roman Empire? It was a change in the *philosophy* of the Roman citizen. Instead of the hard and strenuous life of the worker, the soldier, and the statesman, the Roman citizens began to follow the path of least resistance, to hire others to do the hard things for them, and to follow and support that government whose policy would provide them with the most bread and the most exciting games, at the least expense and effort to themselves.

Let us examine the underlying philosophy of Social Security. It is reasoned that the chief cause of the undoubted fact that many people are miserable, unhealthy, sometimes unhappy, and often afraid of the future, is an economic one. They do not get control of sufficient worldly goods to meet their needs. It is not fair that some people should have a great deal and others very little. Something should be done about it. *We will change the situation by legislation.* Increase the taxes and give this wealth in one form or another to those who are in need. Instead of individuals giving charity to their needy neighbor, the whole country will show its charity by *forcing* those who have to share with those who have not. Urging the greatest good to the greatest number, it is proposed to *tax according to ability to pay, and to give according to need.*

There is no lack of would-be reformers to legislate and otherwise to conduct us into this new Utopia, where by science and a beneficent state a sort of heaven on earth would be provided here and now. But before we let these modern prophets sweep us off our feet with mere promises, let us examine very carefully the fundamental nature of what it is they propose to do. Let us question very carefully the truth of their underlying assumptions. Let us even go so far as to enquire into their motives.

I

How many would-be reformers have *produced* anything, or *sacrificed* health, wealth, or opportunity for personal advancement, in order to help their fellowmen? Have any voluntarily lowered their own standard of living in order to assist underprivileged individuals of the classes they now propose to make "secure" at the expense of the rest of us?

These good folk usually imply that they *love* their neighbors more than the rest of us do. But do they? Why does a business man continue in business after he has enough to live on? Why does the politician in a prominent position continue in politics? "The game is the thing," and I suggest that for the Social Reformers the *game* is to change the present organization of society. Success would bring much glory. Failure would not cost *them* much,—though it might cost the rest of us. They take *that* chance. It is their profession!

II

Should the words and plans of the reformers carry *more weight* than those of other citizens? Not long ago a prominent social service worker, who has been suitably rewarded by society, both financially and by honors, was described as "one of Canada's best known authorities on public welfare." Whatever of truth such an expression means, it at least cannot mean the person has had more experience than the rest of us in completely changing the social and economic scheme of the country and observing the result.

Changes such as are being already proposed in parliament are drastic, far-reaching, and practically beyond recall. What if the opinions of their proposers are not only authoritative but basically wrong? Many of them are ex-patriate Englishmen, whose formative years were spent in the very different

and older order of the British Isles, and whose knowledge of Canada is based on a few years residence in large cities. Others, like Dr. Marsh, learned much of what they know by studying British conditions. Should native Canadians follow such leaders without question, forsaking all those values we have?

III

Without questioning further the authority of its proposers, let us examine the assumption that it is a *proper function* of the state to provide for individual needs and wants, at least to a minimum extent. To admit that "we are our brothers' keepers" is not to say that we can look after the needy by government action more efficiently than by private charity! Moreover, whatever purchasing power is given by the government to one citizen must first be taken away from others in taxes, visible or invisible. Those taxed should receive some consideration by keeping the necessity for taxation at a minimum, by holding the needs of the needy to a minimum. State assistance to the needy, to be ethical, should involve *controlling their activities*, so as to make them less needy. Anything else is unfair to the rest of society. Social reformers are all for controlling those who have something (*some* probably need it), but say little about controlling those who waste what little they have, who are wilfully ignorant, who without restraint breed children they cannot support, who will not trouble to care for their children. In reviewing Richard Llewellyn's *None But the Lonely Heart*, a reviewer says "It shows simply and plainly that there are people in any great city that all the post-war construction cannot help, unless in some mysterious way, strength of character, and tenacity of purpose can be grafted on to their weaknesses."

Another point should be cleared up. Reformers often speak with horror of the "stigma of public charity." For example, under proposals of Health Insurance there are to be no "indigents",—only contributing and "assessed" members of society. Now surely assistance by others (whether given publicly or privately) which is greater than the values returned to society by an individual leaves the individual owing society. There is something fundamentally unsound in the reasoning of those who suggest that society owes every child a degree of economic security, but that public charity carries a stigma. If a stigma is attached, it cannot be something which society owes the person; but if it is the right of the individual, there

should be no talk of stigma. If through either his own fault or that of fate an individual needs and receives assistance, whether through private charity, public charity, or some elaborate scheme of state aid, it seems basically and fundamentally sound that he should be aware of the state of things and not left in the position of thinking it is his *right* to have certain things just because he happens to be born. It is largely a question of attitude. The idea that "The world owes every man a living" is on a much lower level than the challenge "Every man owes the world a life." To tax and discourage such virtues as hard work, efficiency, and thrift, and to subsidize not only the unfortunate but also the lazy, indifferent, shiftless, and inefficient, *could* grow until the virtues decreased below the minimum required for the existence of what we to-day call civilization. "We must beware," says Mr. Churchill, "of trying to build a society in which nobody counts for anything except a politician or an official, a society where enterprise gains no reward, and thrift no privileges."

The slogan "Tax according to ability and give according to need" is dangerous. *Why* should a man's need be supplied without regard to the contribution he makes to society and without consideration of the source of his need? What kind of morality or justice is that which demands that we love our neighbor *more* than ourselves, and compels us to ensure that no matter what a man does, he will not have to suffer any need nor have any cause for remorse? It is certainly not in accordance with any of the ordinary interpretations of Christian ethics. Those who propose it would almost seem to think they know better than does God himself how to deal with evil doers and the ignorant.

IV

Will the needy cease to be a problem to themselves and society if their basic economic needs are met? Many thinkers feel it is more important to change the people than their economic status. Perhaps many of those in great economic need are so because they are that kind of people. Possibly *giving* on too lavish a scale to those who have little will, instead of satisfying their *basic needs*, merely create *more and greater wants*. We are far from being against the expression of charity, pity, kindness, in larger and ever larger ways; but the charity should be voluntary.

To many thinkers just as sincere, intelligent, and learned as the proposers of Social Security the mental and spiritual needs of man are greater than his economic needs; and wisdom, knowledge, self-control, homes, acceptance by the family of responsibility for its members must be developed along with economic security if society is to endure. For example, are we sure of what effect so-called family allowances and children's allowances will have on society? Would we encourage increasing our population of less intelligent strains while taxing the more intelligent practically out of existence? Subsidizing the irresponsible, while making it difficult or impossible for those who build a family to accumulate sufficient wealth to maintain it, represents a philosophy which *could* be fatal to the nation and the race. The acceptance of responsibility by one man and his wife for the care and up-bringing of their children has certain values, well tried and proved. Is it wise to discourage such a spirit, in order that the state may take on more responsibilities? Has not Russia tried the latter and found it somewhat wanting? Has not China tested the former and given the world the oldest and most enduring civilization on the face of the globe? Sociologists and economists, says Alexis Carrell, "should never plan any change in the conditions of life without taking into consideration the mental effects of this change."

The tendency of any programme of Social Security to decrease the need for parents to care for their children, while at the same time decreasing the ability of others to look after their children, is a matter requiring a great deal of consideration before any prejudicial action is taken.

V

Social Security programmes assume that a new world of leisure, luxury, loafing, and laziness is greatly to be desired. Would these four L's benefit either the individual or society? The philosophy that conflict, struggle, and strenuous effort are evils in the world and detrimental to human happiness is not necessarily a true one. The *Genesis* decree "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread" is usually taken to represent a dire disaster to the human race. Perhaps a truer philosophy is hinted at in William Gloag's poem, *An Answer*, which concludes:

Labour may be a burden? so it may,
Yet better far than everlasting play.
If labour be the penalty of sin
I would transgress, the penalty to win.
Perhaps, still smarting from that garden scene,
I challenge God with too severe a mien;
He may have failed His meaning to express,
And when He seemed to curse have meant to bless.

It is of the very nature of life to be in conflict and to struggle. Heraclitus pointed this out 2500 years ago. Like modern science, he thought that in the absence of resistance energy has no power and vanishes.

In the lower stages of life absence of opposition and of need for struggle leads to, and ends in, atrophy and death. The degeneracy of a parasite is always in proportion to its degree of dependence. Life's purposes are those of more resistance. In the words of W. Macneila Dixon, "Life creates, constructs, invents, fights, adapts, conquers and ascends, and is not satisfied." Carrell points out that "Effort is indispensable to the optimum development of the individual." If this tendency applies to all life, and so it seems, then the interests of the individual, and of the race, will be best forwarded by some effort-requiring opposition. According to this philosophy (as opposed to that of Social Security) the obtaining of the four L's, even if it is possible, would spell disaster for the human race

VI

If our previous discussion represents anything of the truth, if with best intentions reformers are urging tremendous and drastic changes without having studied the truth or falsehood of the underlying assumptions, why and how is it that people can be so mistaken? Are you shocked, as they may be, if it is suggested that their fundamental philosophy is one of materialism? Becoming enamoured of *things* and *comforts*, they urge us to sacrifice all other values to obtain these for all. Kindly souls (if they *are* kind) would produce a heaven of material values here and now, if necessary by compulsion. For them it is the gift which is important, not the spirit of the giver. There is no time for orderly evolution of better and better social attitudes,—only for revolution of the existing economic system. They do not believe that "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the *things* which he possesses."

In contrast to this materialistic philosophy I suggest that we need to become a little more practical, realize that man does not live by bread alone, and that the only *permanent* good we can do our neighbor is some benefit to his mind and soul. As Carrell puts it, "The progress of man certainly will not come from an increase in weight, or in longevity . . . Rougher conditions of existence and *more responsibility* would restore moral energy and audacity to the majority of those who have lost them." I am not against progress, but history shows progress by revolution is slower *in the end* than progress by evolution. In their concentration upon the economic and materialistic, the workers for what is known as Social Security have neglected certain truths. Dixon expressed these far better than I can in the following:—

How false it is to suppose that human beings desire unending ease, unthreatened safety, that their *summum bonum* is cushioned comfort, a folding of the hands to sleep. That way madness lies. What, then, is left to occupy their interest and attention? They desire rather difficulties, such is their nature, difficulties to elicit their powers, to keep them alert and wakeful. They wish to be alive. In the absence of resistance to desires, desires decay, and an intolerable, an appalling tedium invades the soul . . . In their anxiety for human welfare, in their collective schemes, the sentimentalists have overlooked the individual man . . . Every man desires to be his own architect, and the creator of his own design . . . And the last and greatest insult you can offer to the human race is to regard it as a herd of cattle to be driven to your selected pasture.

We make no attempt to deny the need for improvement in the lot of many human beings. Our criticism is directed against the underlying philosophy which attempts to cure social ills by economic legislation and force, and over-emphasizes the word security! Perhaps many people should be assisted by society to greater opportunity for *self development*, but to guarantee, or attempt to guarantee, that men can no longer *fail* as individuals is to guarantee also that they can no longer *succeed* as individuals. A community of ants and bees may be highly successful from the standpoint of materialism, but physical security is provided by the colony at the sacrifice of all individuality. Such a philosophy is unsuited for human beings, and any attempt to build upon it cannot ultimately succeed, though it may do great harm to the nation and the race as well as to many individuals!

The swing of the pendulum of Science is away from standardized materialism, towards a more spiritualistic interpretation of the universe, in terms of *probabilities*, *quantum theory*, etc. It is time that economists and social workers made a similar advance.