

## CHAPTER II

### WHY DO MEN WORK?

"We are fast coming to see that the production of wealth is not the chief interest of a Nation, and also that Political Economy must forever remain 'dismal and accursed' if it does not change." — Geonlund.

The mainspring, the primary motive of all human activities, must necessarily be ascertained before we can hope to gain any insight into the causes impelling mankind to enter into social relations one with the other. Or, in other words, before we can hope to gain any insight into these causes, we must seek the correct answer to the simple but fundamental question: Why do men work?

The paramount necessity for such an inquiry might not have so forcibly impressed itself upon us were it not for the fact that the orthodox Political Economy, the Science (?) which claims to be a guide as to what should be the social relations of mankind, is based on the assumption that men work in order to produce, or rather to acquire or to possess "wealth";<sup>1</sup> and consequently, as one of its clearest and most brilliant of its exponents, John Stuart Mill, expresses it:<sup>2</sup> "It concerns itself solely with such of the phenomena of the social state as take place in consequence of the pursuit of wealth." 1 As Mill truly says: "The term 'wealth' is surrounded by a haze of floating and vapoury associations, which will let nothing that is seen through them be shown distinctly." According to some Economists, "wealth" is anything and everything that can be bought and sold, and hence possesses "exchange value." According to others, the use of the term should be restricted to such material objects as have in some way been modified by human labour so as to fit them, or make them more fit, to minister to human wants; but most of them expressly warn us that as soon as such things cease to have "exchange value" — as they must do so soon as everybody has any ample supply of them — they cease to be "wealth" in the Politico Economic meaning of the term.

2 "System of Logic," p. 588. See also "Some Unsettled Questions of Political Economy," pp. 137-140.

Later on we shall learn something of the logical conclusions to which this assumption leads those who accept it; before accepting it ourselves, however, let us examine the facts, and see what they may teach us. For, manifestly, until this simple but basic question has been satisfactorily and correctly answered, we cannot hope to gain any true insight into social questions, into those questions arising out of the relations and inter-relations of mankind.

Here, then, is a man working in a field. What may be his reasons for so doing? That it is not for mere pleasure may be inferred from the fact that it fatigues him, causes him discomfort, even pain. Let us, then, follow his actions to see whether they will enlighten us on this point. He digs up the soil, pulverises it, scatters seeds over it, and — leaves it. In course of time the seeds sprout, grow, flower, and produce more seed; then the man returns, gathers in the crop, separates the grain from the chaff, grinds it, adds water and salt to it, kneads it, bakes it over a fire, and — eats it.

We need watch no more. The results of all his previous labours have now been destroyed, and that advisedly, deliberately, and intentionally. Here, then, must be the end to attain which they were directed. All have obviously been undertaken for the express purpose, not of producing or acquiring bread — this was evidently only a means to a desired end — but of satisfying his wants. To this end the field was dug, the soil prepared, the seeds scattered, the harvest reaped, the grain crushed, and the flour baked. All these operations, no matter by what various names they may be known, are but different stages in the process of food-producing; and the food produced is the concrete result of all the labour necessary to its production. At none of the intermediary stages were the products of his labour of any immediate use to the worker. They only advantaged him in so far as they brought him one step nearer to the goal of his activities. The ploughed field (even the plough itself), the growing crop, the harvested grain, the flour, the dough, etc., can, then, all be regarded as food in course of production. And the end of these activities is not attained until the food has been consumed, and has thus ministered to human wants. The fields may have been dug, the seed sown, the harvest reaped, the grain crushed, the flour baked, the bread itself sold — i.e. exchanged for other commodities — and a shipwreck, a fire, even a careless cook, may summarily destroy all the results of the labour expended before the end to which it was directed has been attained.

The satisfaction of material wants is, in truth, the prime-motor of man's activities. Hunger stirs him to exertion, and the cravings of hunger once satisfied, other wants arise, prompting him to renewed activities. Now, the satisfaction of a want is either a necessity or a gratification, according as the want is either a physiological necessity for the maintenance of life, or one, the satisfaction of which would merely add to well-being, comfort, or happiness. For the former class the term, "want" may be the more appropriate, for the latter, the term "desire"; but, as for our purpose a "want" may be regarded as a "desire," and a "desire" as a "want," we shall use these terms as synonymous.

The answer to the first question we put to ourselves, Why do men work? is now plain and obvious. Men work in order to enjoy, in order to satisfy their wants, to minister to their desires, whatever these may be. So expressed, the generalisation is a universal

one. It is true of the boy at play as of the man at work; of the labours of a John Howard, a Darwin, a Tolstoi, or a Henry George, as of those of a Cecil Rhodes, a Barney Barnato, a Jabez Balfour, or a Bill Sykes. However different, all have desires they wish to gratify, and it is to satisfy these that prompts them to activity.

Men work in order to enjoy. The satisfaction of desire is the incentive that spurs man to exertion. It is the primary motive, the determining cause, and the culminating point of all human activities, whether of the individual or of the community. This is the fundamental truth, a clear recognition of which is the necessary preliminary to a correct understanding of social phenomena.

This view is not only in accordance with facts — that is, in correspondence with the actual feelings of mankind with respect to this subject — but possesses also the advantage of clearing away many of the misapprehensions, and removing many of the difficulties due to the peculiar teachings of the current Political Economy on this point. For by reasoning from the unwarranted assumption that the sole aim of mankind is the production or acquisition of "wealth" — that is, according to their own definitions, of material things possessing exchange value — the student is immediately confronted by a large, and, happily, an ever-increasing number of cases that by no possible means can be reconciled with it. For the labours of the philanthropist, who devotes his time and his fortune to the relief of the distressed, or those of the noble-hearted Damians and Nightingales, whose sole aim and endeavour is to alleviate the sufferings of their fellow-creatures, are not exceptions to the above rule, but positive anomalies — anomalies that no amount of dialectics can possibly reconcile to it. But if we regard the aim of man's activities to be enjoyment, and enjoyment to consist in the satisfaction of individual desires or inclinations, then the rule becomes universal and suffers no exceptions.

From this point of view, the reason why one man seeks the gambling hell or the stock-exchange, while another prefers ministering to the dire necessities of a leprous community, is sufficiently explained by the fact that their inclinations are different. Practically, each of them is actuated by the same motives, but they take very different views of the objects and duties of life. Which line of conduct is wiser or better may be an open question, but there is no longer any question of exceptions or anomalies; and hence the conclusion forms a safe basis for further investigations.

We repeat it again. From the point of view that the aim of man's efforts, the goal of all his enterprise, is happiness; and that happiness consists in different enjoyments, determined by habit and circumstance — all the manifold activities of mankind are amenable to uniform explanation. In all cases it would be a matter for the most serious consideration as to whether certain conduct, and the satisfaction of certain desires are

not reprehensible, whether they are not eventually productive of misery to the individual or to the race. And the knowledge of the ultimate results or tendencies of any such conduct would necessarily prove a powerful incentive to influence rational men to abandon certain habits, and to find their enjoyment in other and more healthful directions. To determine such points, more especially the inevitable tendencies of a given course of social action, would be one of the main functions of that science, by whatever name it may be known, whose province it is to instruct mankind<sup>1</sup> how certain desired social ends may be achieved.

The direct opposition of the current teachings of Political Economy with the doctrines of the accepted Morality, has been very generally recognised by writers on either of these two branches of human speculation. Manifestly, if the teachings of the one cannot be reconciled with the teachings of the other, there must be something radically wrong with the one or the other — or with both.

According to this view, desires may be regarded as the motive force, the impelling force, and the amount of labour necessary to attain any desired end, as the resistance to be overcome; and as the one or the other preponderates in any individual or community, so the necessary work will be undertaken or omitted. As already pointed out, apart from the more primitive wants common to all, desires vary, both in kind and intensity, in different individuals and in different communities. An end which may appeal strongly to some, may leave others comparatively unaffected. But in one respect all men, and, indeed, all animals, are alike, viz. that of two or more courses open to them, they will, other things being equal, always select the one by which they deem the desired end may be attained at the least cost of pain, discomfort, or exertion—in other words, they will always act on the line of least resistance, or, what is equivalent, of greatest attraction.<sup>1</sup> This fundamental principle, the desire for comfort and aversion to discomfort, which impels man to act on the line of least resistance, has been one of the main factors in the evolution of society. To it may be attributed not only the invention of tools and their constant improvement, but also the adoption and continuous development of co-operation and division of labour, the extension of which marks every advance in social organisation. In fact, the very existence, as well as the continuous expansion, of society may itself be attributed to this basic principle, which acts on individuals and communities as does the law of gravitation on a number of molecules. Given a number of individuals, or groups of individuals, families, tribes, communities, or nations, and the workings of this principle will impel them to form relations one with the other, until, continuously acting as it does, it welds them into one organic whole. Society has become a fact, not by contract, not by mutual agreement, not as the result of some premeditated plan contrived by human genius, but from necessity. It has its origin, and owes its development, not to the wisdom, but to the physiological constitution of man. His wants, his desire for comfort and

aversion to discomfort, have always been the determining factors in its extension. Not by man's deliberate contrivance, but in spite of it, has it grown; and even today it continues to develop despite man's endeavours to the contrary. People may form separate nations, speak different languages, have different forms of government, different habits, customs, laws, and institutions; they may be separated by mountain ranges, rivers or oceans, by inherited prejudices, ancient animosities, or by protective tariffs; they may be hostile or friendly, love or hate each other: yet do they form part of one organic whole, are united by bonds they cannot sever, and, alas! as yet do not understand, but the right understanding of which constitutes the true inwardness, the aim and purpose, of the study of Economics.

1 "Whether it proceed from experience of the irksomeness of labor and the desire to avoid it, or, further back than that, have its source in some innate principle of the human constitution, this disposition of man to seek the satisfaction of their desires with the minimum of exertion is so universal and unailing that it constitutes one of those invariable sequences that we denominate laws of nature, and from which we may safely reason. It is this law of nature that is the fundamental law of political economy, the central law from which its deductions and explanations may with certainty be drawn, and, indeed, by which alone they become possible. It holds the same place in the sphere of political economy that the law of gravitation does in physics. Without it there would be no recognition of order, and all would be chaos."  
— "Science of Political Economy" (Henry George), Book I., chap, xii., pp. 87, 88.