

CHAPTER XI

SOCIAL ETHICS

"Here is the fundamental error: the crude and monstrous assumption that the land is, or can be, the private property of anyone. It is a usurpation exactly similar to that of slavery."

— Francis W. Newman.

The question we have now to consider is that known in economic works as Distribution. This is not concerned, as the term might lead the uninitiated to suppose, with the means employed to distribute, transport, or exchange commodities — this would be an industrial rather than an ethical or an economic question — but with the causes determining the distribution, allotment, or apportioning of the gratifications at the disposition of any given community.

Of course, if each worked isolated and unrelated, if each worked entirely by himself and for himself, there would be no such question to consider; nor, indeed, any other economic or ethical question. It is only when men co-operate one with the other that the question of the distribution or apportioning of the results of their united labours at once springs into existence; and as society develops and mankind become more and more inter-dependent and interrelated, this question tends to become of everincreasing importance. We must not lose sight of the fact that the distribution of the results of the united activities of the community, as of every body of associated, co-operating workers, will at all times be determined by the customs, regulations, laws, and institutions they have adopted, or which have been forced upon them.¹ Where these are based on equity, on the recognition of the claims of all, this distribution will tend to be equitable; where the contrary is the case, where special privileges are secured to some, this distribution will tend to be more or less inequitable, or iniquitous.

1 "The Distribution of Wealth is a matter of human institutions solely. The things once there, mankind, individually or collectively, can do with them as they like. They can place them at the disposal of whomsoever they please, and on whatever terms. Further, in the social state, in every state except total solitude, any disposal whatever of them can only take place by the consent of society, or rather of those who dispose of its active force. . . . The Distribution of Wealth, therefore, depends on the laws and customs of society. The rules by which it is determined are what the opinions and feelings of the ruling portion of the community make them, and are very different in

different ages and countries; and might be still more different if mankind so chose." — "Principles of Political Economy," Book II., chap. i., § 1 (John Stuart Mill). In view of the glaring inequalities of distribution which characterise our present civilisation — some revelling in idleness and luxury, enjoying the present, and confident of the future; others, though working hard and continuously, deprived of everything save the barest necessities of life, often unable to obtain even these, deprived of all enjoyment of the present, harassed and haunted by well-founded fears as to the future — this question becomes of paramount importance: it forms, indeed, the Social Problem of today. After the reflections contained in the two preceding chapters, the problem presents itself to us as follows: Is this inequality the natural and inevitable fruit of social life? Is it due to differences in development, differences in ability, and hence can only be remedied by Charity, and not by Justice? Or is it but an incidental accompaniment of social life, due to difference or inequality of opportunity, the necessary result of customs, laws, and institutions, based on inequality — customs, laws, and institutions not engendered by the requirements of social life, but natural to a time when the predatory instincts were the predominant instincts, the Predatory Classes were the Ruling Classes; and the survival of which may be hindering mankind from reaping the full harvest of peaceful and equitable social union?

Before this question can be satisfactorily answered, we must carry our inquiry a step further. Accepting, as our previous investigations have forced us to do, the Law of Justice, or Law of Equal Freedom, as the first principle of Economics or Politics, as the basis of Social Ethics, our immediate aim must be to ascertain all that it involves, to determine what, in accordance therewith, the individual may expect from his fellows, and they expect of him: to which end this chapter will be devoted.

In the first place: If Justice is to be done, if the Law of Equal Freedom is to be obeyed, if we are to recognise and to respect the equal claims of all to life, to liberty, and to the pursuit of happiness, it necessarily follows that each must be left free to dispose of his own life and activities as he may deem most conducive to his own happiness, provided only he in no way infringes on the equal freedom of others. In other words, in obedience to this fundamental ethical or social principle, each has a right to expect that his freedom of action shall be respected by others, and, conversely, each would know that he has to respect the equal freedom of others.

Secondly: If each is to be left free to dispose of his own activities as he may deem most conducive to his happiness; or to put it somewhat differently, if we are to respect

the indisputable claims of the individual to himself, he must also be left free to dispose of the fruits of his own activities, of his own exertions, as he may deem most conducive to his personal well-being and contentment: again with the above proviso. This forms the rational basis of the institution of property.

Thirdly: If the freedom of all is to be equally respected, if the claims of all to existence, to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, are to be equally considered, it follows that each must be left equally free to avail himself of the natural resources at the disposition of the community. For, manifestly, if it be admitted that the claims of all to existence are to be equally considered, it follows that all must be secured equal opportunities to avail themselves of the only means by which human beings can maintain existence. To admit the claims of some to special dominion over the earth is to ignore the equal claims of the rest. Justice, therefore, does not permit of private property in land. Hence if we would shape our social institutions in accordance therewith, the system which places the control of the natural resources in the hands of the few will have to yield place to one whereby the claims of all to the use of the earth may be respected and enforced.

As pointed out in the opening chapters, Labour and Land are the two essential elements in the production of all these commodities men daily require in order to maintain life, and minister to their wants. Over his own labour the individual may claim to be sole lord and master. Over the labour or over the results of the labour of his fellows, the individual can have no special claim. But, in accordance with the Law of Equal Freedom, with the demands of Justice, he can claim to be secured equal opportunities to make his own labour minister to his own wants. Though perishing from thirst, he has no right to demand to share in the water his neighbour has already drawn from the river; but on what, save force, can his neighbour deny him equally free access to the river in order to draw water for himself? All such claims, however long they may have been sanctioned by the community, are a direct infringement of the Law of Liberty. No community can claim to have its laws and institutions framed in accordance with the dictates of Justice, so long as such claims are recognised and enforced. Moreover, as we hope to be able to show in the following pages, it is to such infringements of the Law of Equal Freedom that all the remediable social ills, under which our modern civilisation is groaning, can be directly attributed, and which today are hindering mankind from reaping the full harvest of its industrial activities, from enjoying the full blessings of Liberty and of Justice.

To sum up: The Law of Liberty demands (a) that each should be left free to dispose of

his own activities as he may deem most conducive to his own happiness, provided only he in no way infringes on the equal freedom of others; (b) that each should be left free to dispose of the results of his own exertions as he may deem most conducive to his own happiness, again with the above proviso; and (c) that each should be left equally free to share in the natural bounties and to avail himself of the natural opportunities at the disposition of the community. Thus, and thus only, can the prevailing laws and institutions limiting the activities and determining the relations and inter-relations of the different members of the community be made to conform to the dictates of Justice, to the Law of Equal Freedom.

Of course, it may be contended that the practical enforcement of the Law of Equal Freedom, that to do Justice, is "impossible" and "impracticable," and can never be carried into effect. Almost everything is regarded by the unthinking as "impossible" and "impracticable" until it has been accomplished, and their "never" simply indicates their own mental state. Past experience suffices to teach us that what is inconceivable to the one is the dream of the next, and the commonplace of the succeeding generation. Moreover, as already pointed out, the history of modern civilisation is but the record of the progress of communities from Despotism toward Democracy, from the reign of Force toward the reign of Reason, from the thralldom of Privilege toward the majesty of Freedom, from Iniquity toward Equity, from Darkness toward the Light. But yesterday the goal itself was hidden from our ken; today, thanks to the labours of thousands of earnest workers, not only does it stand revealed to our view, but the path to it is clearly discernible, and the hindrances to its attainment known to all who care to know. Well, then, may we doubt whether the ultimate triumph of Reason, of Freedom, of Justice, can long be delayed. Unforeseen hindrances may arise; enormous difficulties may still remain to be overcome; but —

"While one true man speaks out against injustice,
While through men's chorused 'Right!' clear rings his 'Wrong!'

Freedom still lives. One day she will reward him
Who trusted in her, though she tarried long;

Who held her creed, was faithful till her coming,
Who for her sake strove, suffered, and was strong.

"She will bring crowns for those who love and serve her;
If thou canst live for her, be satisfied;

If thou canst die for her, rejoice! Our brothers
At least shall crown our graves and say, "These died

Believing in the sun when night was blackest,
And by our dawn their faith is justified I"1

1"Until the Dawn" (Edith Nesbit).