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Natural Rights: Henry George and the Economic Fruits of a Good Society

By JAMES M. DAWSEY*

ABSTRACT. This article examines Henry George's understanding of how natural rights grow out of a just society. His views were influenced by the 17th-century proponents of natural rights, but cannot be subsumed under them. The connection of freedom to obligation affirmed by George's classical Protestantism allowed him to overcome tension between theories of natural law and natural rights. Rights and responsibilities were not abstractions for George. His practical solution for restructuring society offers a modern path to a more just society in which rights would abound.

Introduction. The Foundation of Economy

Our word economy comes from the Greek verb *oikonomeō* meaning to plan, manage, arrange, order. This word joined two nouns: *oikos*, meaning house, habitation, dwelling, household, property, possessions; and *nomos*, designating law, rule, principle. In early Christian literature, *oikonomia* often indicated God's arrangements for human redemption and salvation (Arndt and Gingrich, 1979: 55). Sometimes, *oikonomia* signified God's design in nature (e.g., Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus).

Natural Law

The 19th-century social philosopher Henry George drew on these root meanings when he opened his study of *The Science of Political Economy* ([1898] 1981) not with a description of how goods and services are produced and distributed, but with a discussion of man's place in the universe. Creation shows design, the hand of a beneficent

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Creator. When we look at the universe, we see something wondrous. Although amazingly ordered, the universe continuously changes in ways similar to a living organism. The complexity of organization can be observed through telescope and microscope.

Men and women are tenants on the earth's surface, scarcely able to understand the environs each occupies. While seemingly fixed in space, we are in constant motion traveling on "a globe large to us, yet only as a grain of sand on the seashore compared with the bodies and spaces of the universe" (George [1898] 1981: 12, 13). And not only is our world moving, but we too are in constant change. Our bodies are "like the flame of a gas burner, which has continuous and defined form, but only as the manifestation of changes in a stream of succeeding particles." Human bodies, like everything else in the universe, are passing manifestations of matter and energy.

But even in this sea of motion, and even when glimpsed from our limited perspectives, George ([1898] 1981: 14–16) believed the Creator's design is everywhere evident. Squirrels store nuts, birds construct nests, beavers dam creeks, bees extract honey from flowers, and spiders spin webs. Instincts guide the animal world. Animals act in specific ways because that is how they were designed to act. "Nature provides for all living things beneath man by implanting in them blind, strong impulses which at proper times and seasons prompt them to do what it is necessary they should do." And people, too, are similar to other animals—for instance, in the strong impulses that prompt the mother "to press the new-born babe to her breast and the babe to suckle." Except that humans are not as strongly guided by instincts. In fact, if measured by strictly physical terms, we are inferior animals, not only because of our restricted instincts, but in that we have not been provided by nature with fur or thick hides as a natural covering from the weather nor with exceptional powers to procure food and defend ourselves. Yet, humans stand a rung higher than other animals. For "man is created in the likeness of the All-Maker."

What distinguishes humans from other animals? Henry George viewed human nature as rich and many-faceted (Dawsey 2012). George ([1898] 1981: 9) focused on the human mind especially as our rational abilities enable us to become makers and producers. By "mind" he meant also spirit or soul—"that which feels, perceives,

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thinks, wills." Echoing the Hebrew scriptures (Psalm 8:5) and the "Oration on the Dignity of Man" (Mirandola), George ([1898] 1981: 17) claimed that reason allows humans "to rise or fall, to soar above the brute or to sink lower." Different from other animals, women and men can mold their environment (Bronowski 1973: 411–438). Curiosity incites the human mind to seek ways to improve life. Men and women then solve problems, devise new ways of overcoming hardships, and through their ingenuity expand the bounty of nature. Created in the likeness of God, we too are makers endowed with the ability to devise increasingly better means of satisfying our needs and desires.

George ([1898] 1981: 29) affirmed that it is the ability to think critically that elevates humans above other animals and makes us the crown of creation. "Man is an animal; but an animal plus something more—the divine spark differentiating him from all other animals, which enable him to become a maker, and which we call reason."

But what is that specific quality of reason that differentiates us from the lower animals? George ([1898] 1981: BK I, Ch. 5) identified the ability to trace the relationship of cause and effect. It is the power of "thinking things out," understanding what precedes in exact relationship to what follows

> that renders the world intelligible to man; which enables him to understand the connection of things around him and the bearings of things above and beyond him; to live not merely in the present, but to pry into the past and to forecast the future; to distinguish not only what are presented to him though the senses, but things of which the senses cannot tell; to recognize as through mists a power from which the world itself and all that therein is must have proceeded . . . (George [1898] 1981: 34)

It is the ability to connect cause to effect and effect to cause that allows mastery over the lesser animals, control over planting and sowing, and in sum the shaping of the world around us in a manner that increases nature's bounty. Discerning events that show consequence from those that only temporally follow one another and then deciphering not just past relationships but previewing future consequences allows men and women themselves to become creators. This mental faculty does much more than simply elevate us above other animals on the *scala naturae*, medieval's great chain of being. It allows us to become makers of a better world, artisans alongside the

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Creator. According to George, our ability to think critically allowed progress and gives birth to civilization.

Even in the savage state, people were makers. Then, by producing goods and trading them, men and women further satisfied their simple needs. Communities grew. And with the ability to record and transmit knowledge, by cooperating in producing and exchanging goods, services, and ideas, our ancestors drove progress (George [1898] 1981: BK I, Ch. 6). Greater spiritual and moral sensibilities accompanied the move from savagery to civilization. The advance in production and exchange walked arm in arm with a keener sense of justice and appreciation for the rights of others.

It is a condition of women and men, however, not to be satisfied by discovering only immediate causes. George ([1898] 1981: 45–47, 52–53) reasoned that unraveling the right relations of things leads us ever back in the string of sequences to seek the first or beginning cause. We soon notice that not all happenings are set in motion by individual will. For example, while "the child cries because it wants to cry and laughs because it wants to laugh," it does not at a particular age grow teeth because it wishes for teeth. Here, we discern "a higher will and more comprehensive purpose than that of man; a will conscious from the very first of what will yet be needed, as well as of what already is needed."

And not only with the teething child, but everywhere in the world around us George ([1898] 1981: 54) recognized the adaptation of means to ends driven by this greater will. He quoted Pope's famous lines:

> All are parts of one stupendous whole
> Whose body Nature is, and God the soul.

George ([1898] 1981: 55–56) drew an analogy: when looking upon our own ability to build houses, make clothes, invent tools, construct machines, adorn ourselves, we recognize the same adaptation of means to ends operating on a much grander scale throughout nature. And as our will drives our productions, a much greater will must lie behind the natural world. Yes, there is design; and, there is a Designer. To George, the conclusion was inescapable. The invariable sequences we glimpse were put into place by the Creator of the universe.

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Whether called "Law of Nature" or "Will of God" was not significant to George. What was significant is that such overarching will exists and that our human reason can discern it and is analogous to it.

Natural Rights

From his argument for design, Henry George posited natural rights. He discussed his views in an 1883 essay included as Chapter 10 in the book *Social Problems* ([1883] 2006: 92–104). The Creator who designed nature established rights between people, which themselves are impressed and revealed through nature. Perhaps taking a stab at Jeremy Bentham, George claimed that the existence of such rights was so obvious as to not necessitate defense ([1883] 2006: 92). Natural rights preceded government, originating with the will of the Creator and not in social contract. Natural law and the accompanying human rights assigned by the Creator, claimed George ([1883] 2006: 92–93), form "the only true and sure basis of social organization":

> Just as, if we would construct a successful machine, we must conform to physical law, such as the law of gravitation, the law of combustion, the law of expansion, etc.; just as, if we would maintain bodily health, we must conform to the laws of physiology; so, if we would have a peaceful and healthful social state, we must conform our institutions to the great moral laws—laws to which we are absolutely subject, and which are as much above our control as are the laws of matter and of motion.

What are the natural, unalienable rights of man? George assumed an essential core. From the American Declaration of Independence, the preamble to the Constitution of the United States, and the French 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens, George ([1883] 2006: 93–94) pulled the terms life, liberty for ourselves and our posterity, the pursuit of happiness, justice, equality (with respect to rights), property, security, and resistance of oppression. Later in the essay, George ([1883] 2006: 96–98) added the natural right to the fruits of one's labor, the right of a man to use his own powers to make a living for himself and his family—and even the right to work itself. He further included the rights to access to land to work on, to fair payment for labor, and to a just distribution of wealth.

But George did not intend in the essay a comprehensive list of rights. Rather, he wished to lead his readers to a deeper understanding

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and a truer practice of the rights they affirmed. And he seemed especially interested in the economic ramifications that followed from these rights. For whenever the deep sense of these rights was ignored, social disease and political evils followed (George [1883] 2006: 92).

Part I. Rights as Freedoms

Henry George's affirmation that an individual has a right to enjoy the fruits of his or her labor fits closely with the thinking of John Locke. This was an economic freedom. And we quickly see that many of George's economic ideas were influenced by those of the great 17th proponents of natural rights, Thomas Hobbes († 1679) and, especially, John Locke († 1704) who so much influenced the economic liberalism of Adam Smith († 1790), David Ricardo († 1823), Thomas Malthus († 1834), and John Stuart Mill († 1873). For each held that human rights could be discovered apart from tradition, the Church, or any special intuition or divine insight separate from what was natural to every person. Each affirmed liberty, equality, and the necessity of a government that protects life and property. They encouraged people to think for themselves. They considered reason to be a trustworthy guide, valued observation, and opposed ignorance and superstition of all types. They agreed that the power of rulers should be limited. And they were convinced that the authority of government rested on consent of the governed. But there are significant differences, too.

Thomas Hobbes

Natural rights are those rights that pertain to humans in their natural state. In the first part of *The Leviathan* (1660), Hobbes described humans as dissatisfied beings. They are individualists. In the natural state they are driven by pleasure and the " restless desire for power after power, that ceaseth only in death" (1660: Ch. 11). They are anti-social, basically unconcerned for others except as they affect themselves. Are people rational? Yes, but only to the extent it serves their interests. Humans are vain. Although filled with delusions about their own superiority and popularity, they live in fear of being abused

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or exploited. Why? Because when they search inwardly they readily imagine themselves stealing, murdering, and raping, and they realize that the same might befall them.

Although devoting the last two parts of *The Leviathan* to the Christian Commonwealth and the possibility of the individual attainment in an afterlife of salvation or damnation, Hobbes distrusted religion. The seeds of religion, he thought, are opinions of ghosts, ignorance, fear, and false prophecy. People attribute what they cannot explain otherwise to God. Further, religion is a dangerous illusion that promises a greater good and a final aim that cannot be kept. To him, society had no ultimate goal. Nor was lasting happiness possible for the individual; only the momentary felicity of "a continual progress of the desire, from one object to another" (1660: Ch. 11). The Kingdom of God spoken of in the scriptures pertained to Heaven, not human life on earth. Given their fundamental selfishness, in their daily existence men and women sought their own good and avoided evils, "chiefly the chiefest of natural evils, which is Death" (Hobbes, 1651: Ch. 1, ¶ 7).

In the state of nature, every person had a right to protect his or her life and property. Economic freedom was total: "a Right to everything; even to another's body," Hobbes wrote (1660: Ch. 14). But fear led people to give up some freedom for security, and in Chapters 14–15 of *The Leviathan,* Hobbes enumerated 19 natural laws (or moral virtues) that, if followed, would protect people in civil society. For example, people should keep promises, be just, show gratitude, act with mercy. In sum, Hobbes argued that every person should live by the golden rule—"This is that Law of the Gospell; Whatsoever you require that others should do to you, that do ye to them. And that law of all men, *Quod tibi fieri non vis, alteri ne feceris*" (1660: Ch. 14).

But the compromise, the moral virtues, only brought security in so far as all kept them. In this regard, the virtues were not laws of nature in the traditional sense of universally binding moral laws that men must follow if they are to find happiness and live in a just society but "mere theorems" having binding force only when thought of also as divine commands (1660: Ch. 16; for discussion, see Tierney 2002: 397). Justice, keeping promises, and community appear as virtues that

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men and women would not follow if left to their true natures. If some in society followed the virtues, while others did not, those who followed risked becoming vulnerable. The laws must be enforced, but no single or few individuals could exert enough power on their own to force everyone's compliance. Thus, for protection of their own selves and their families, and for the possibility of enjoying a better life, people were willing to enter into a compact with others, restraining their own liberty in favor of a sovereign who could enforce the laws of society (1660: Chs. 17–18).

At its core, Hobbes's social contract is an agreement between rational, free equals. Although each gives up some advantages, all benefit from the agreement. Henry George defended just this type of freedom for the economic realm in his book *Protection or Free Trade,* where he argued against tariffs. The book was published in 1886, soon before his New York City mayoral campaign. At the time, George's position was not popular (George, Jr. [1900] 1981: 447–449), which probably affected his chances of election. George argued that tariffs (and taxes, subsidies, and other protective measures) hindered trade, stymied production, led to more expensive goods for working families, created inefficiencies, and so on (Bonaparte 1989). According to George ([1886] 1992): 286), free trade meant "natural trade," with no artificial restrictions:

> Free trade, in its true meaning, requires not merely the abolition of protection but the sweeping away of all tariffs—the abolition of all restrictions (save those imposed in the interests of public health and morals) on the bringing of things into a country or the carrying of things out of a country. Free trade applies as well to domestic as to foreign trade, and in its true sense requires the abolition of all internal taxes that fall on buying, selling, transporting or exchanging, on the making of any transaction or the carrying on of any business.

George directed much of his argument at the workingman. Free trade increased jobs and wages.

Is the radical freedom of the Hobbesian view of natural rights compatible with our traditional understanding of natural law? Hobbes (1651: Ch. 14, ¶3) himself names natural law and natural rights opposites: "Law is a fetter, Right is freedome, and they differ like contraries."

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Hobbes makes us aware of the possibility of tension in George's thought. On the one hand, natural law connotes universal truths for ordering society. It stipulates a higher moral law, with George, a law coming from God. Natural law imposes obligations. We subject ourselves to natural law. We respond to it through duty, acquiescence, and obedience. But a natural right, on the other hand, indicates an inherent claim that the individual enjoys merely from the fact of being human. It signifies a realm of personal autonomy. A right does not obligate action but liberates the individual to determine what course of action, if any, to take (Tierney 2002).

John Locke

Henry George affirmed both natural law and natural rights—all coming from the Creator. In maintaining that connection, he followed John Locke ([1664] 1990: 119), who argued that the Almighty's higher moral law can be known "by the right use of those faculties with which [a person] is provided by nature [and is able to] attain by himself."

Locke's most thorough discussion of natural rights occurs in *The Two Treatises of Government*, especially in the *Second Treatise*. There, Locke ([1689] 1764: Chs. 1–5) wrote that all men are created equal in nature—and free. But the individual's natural liberty does not extend to the right of doing whatever he or she wants. Each person's freedom is subject to the rights of others and the law of reason (Locke [1689] 1764: Chs. 6–10). With children, this means that they are subject to their parents up until the age that they are capable of understanding what reason is and obeying it. And those who would violate the rights of others may be restrained and punished. Punishments should be severe enough to discourage offenders.

When "living together according to reason, without a common superior on earth to judge them," people are in a state of nature. He contrasted that "state of peace, good-will, mutual assistance, and preservation" with the "state of enmity, malice, violence, and mutual destruction" when people are in a state of war (Locke [1689] 1764: ¶19).

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Already living in families and groups, people join further to avoid the state of war and to form a government that makes laws and works for the public good. Since free, people cannot be subjected to power by another without consent—even if beneficial and well-intended. When joining into community, men and women consent to give up some of their natural liberty in favor of a decision by the majority (Locke [1689] 1764: Chs. 6–10).

A chief purpose of law is to protect, regulate, and preserve property. Since the Creator provided the natural world to benefit Adam and his descendants (all people) in common, how did individuals come to own property? Locke ([1689] 1764: ¶¶27–28) argued that through their labor individuals establish rights to property. He gave the example of a man in the state of nature picking up acorns from the ground or apples from a tree in the wild. By gathering the acorns or apples, the man removed them from what was held in common and made them his. Consent from others is not necessary for appropriation. This freedom to appropriate the goods of nature, Locke thought, applies not only to fruits one might pick and animals one might hunt but to land itself.

What is to prevent hoarding to the detriment of others? God provided richly for all to enjoy. The provisions of nature were abundant and largely untapped. Appropriating a good from the common realm was like drinking water from a river in that it brought good to the user without injuring any other person. Land for cultivation was plentiful in most parts, with a large frontier in America. And in densely-populated countries like England, governments had established the commons that by law could not be enclosed.

Further, Locke ([1689] 1764: ¶37) observed there was a disincentive in the natural state to accumulating more than could be used, since "fruits rotted and venison putrefied." Finally, Locke [1689] 1764: ¶40) was convinced that labor not only increased the value of what nature provided but was the principal reason for value.

> For it is labor indeed that puts the difference of value on everything; and let any one consider what the difference is between an acre of land planted with tobacco or sugar, sown with wheat or barley, and an acre of the same land lying in common without any husbandry upon it, and he will find that the improvement of labor makes the far greater part of the value. I think

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> it will be but a very modest computation to say that of the products of the earth useful to the life of man . . . ninety-nine hundredths are wholly to be put on account of labor.

Part II. Toward Less Individual Autonomy and Greater Social Justice

Hobbes and Locke held pre-Lyellian, pre-Darwinian views of humans in the natural state. Although differing in the amount of selfishness and sociability they attributed to people, both described natural man as wholly formed, with fixed characteristics, enjoying complete freedom in the natural state. They imagined people in the natural state equal to one another and as much (and as little) governed by reason as are modern humans. Hobbes and Locke assumed that untrammeled freedom and equality are part and parcel with being human. In fact, liberty and equality became with Hobbes and Locke abstractions capable of being described apart from particular situations. Autonomy was present in Adam (and with Locke, also Eve) and is inherent to every descendant. Hobbes and Locke joined in focusing on the individual's claim to his and her birthright.

But where did such a natural state ever exist? We are not convinced by Locke's ([1689] 1764: ¶14) claim that it is everywhere there are "princes and rulers of independent governments." Science has provided us in the 21st century with a variety of images of natural man: Lucy and Australopithicus afarensis, Homo habilis, Homo sapiens sapiens, the Taino of Hispaniola, the Wyandot from Georgian Bay, the Tupí from the Amazon rainforest. Have anthropologists who study primitive hominids and tribal groups discovered anyone similar to the Hobbesian-Lockean atomistic man? And to what extent do we encounter natural dispositions for freedom and equality when observing humans' nearest relatives, the great apes? In their studies, Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey, and Birute Galdikas have documented varying social structures and behaviors: monogamy with gibbons and promiscuity with bonobos; group life with chimpanzees, small troops with gorillas, and solitary life with orangutans; exceptional problem solving and the use (and even manufacture) of tools documented with chimpanzees; and language acquisition with a number of great apes. What our primatologists have uncovered is variety.

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Much more in keeping with our modern understanding, Henry George maintained men's and women's continuum with the animal kingdom—and all of creation. No, he was not Darwinian in thinking that the development of species occurred through natural selection, the survival of the fittest. He posited the will of a Creator, divine design. But he insisted on evolution, progress. Change characterizes the universe. People and animals both respond to impulses. What distinguishes us from other animals? It is our ability to think critically, to perceive cause and effect, that makes us superior. (And given George's appreciation of science and given the findings of modern anthropologists, we imagine that if writing today George would have stressed the connection with other animals even further by claiming only that people enjoyed a greater ability to perceive cause and effect.) Regardless, the point is that what distinguishes us from animals is not our right for self-preservation, to fight for survival, to protect our lives and those of our group, to safeguard our freedom, to secure our territory, or hold on to our property—for all living organisms do the same. It is the quality of our thinking and the extent to which humans can govern future change that differentiates us from other animals. People, for George, are artisans of a new world.

Thomas Hobbes fits with that group of British Enlightenment figures like Lord Edward Herbert of Cherbury († 1648), Matthew Tindal († 1733), and others often lumped together as Deists. And although John Locke accepted revelation and miracles, he too shared basic concepts with that group: God created the universe and gave each person the ability to reason. But God is not much active in daily human affairs. Reason (and observation, with Locke) is how men and women discern the Creator's will; reason is the ultimate court of appeal for truth. Personal virtue and piety are the touchstones of true worship; Jesus was the Great Teacher who provided ethical guidelines for moral life. Every person should repent from his or her sins, and there is an afterlife. God dispenses rewards and punishments in this life and the next.

We are struck by the extent to which religion pertains to individuals instead of communities of faith with this group; how private religion is. And we are struck also by how distant God is from men and

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women—largely detached from the day-to-day operations of the universe, which operates as a machine built and set in motion by that great Engineer.

Henry George, to the contrary, was communitarian—in personal life always surrounded by family and friends. And in public life, too, we think of him alongside the landless of Ireland, fighting with them for a piece of earth upon which to carve out a livelihood (George [1881] 2008: 3–100); we think of him campaigning against Tammany Hall (George, Jr. 1981: 459–481); we think of him writing against the social problems of the day, the creeping influence in our politics of powerful organizations, the growth of mega-farms, the concentration of increasing inequality in America, the concentration and perpetuation of wealth, and the harm caused by monopolies (George ([1883] 1981): Chs. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6). He spent himself fighting for others (George, Jr. 1981: 584–611). Justice was a rushing stream in his life.

George's view of the universe was not at all mechanical. It was organic. The world is growing, changing, living, he thought. Creation is continuous. And people themselves participate in creation, helping God create. The future is yet to be determined. Much depends on the work of God's co-workers.

George longed for justice. And he fought for it. George ([1879] 1979: 9–10) opened his most famous book, *Progress and Poverty*, by targeting social injustice:

> It is though an immense wedge were being forced, not underneath society, but through society. Those who are above the point of separation are elevated, but those who are below are crushed down. . . . In the United States it is clear that squalor and misery, and the vices and crimes that spring from them, everywhere increase. . . . It is in the older and richer sections of the Union that pauperism and distress among the working classes are becoming most apparent. . . . This association of poverty with progress is the great enigma of our times.

And then, George [1879] 1979: 551–552) closed the book 500 pages later with the same concern for justice:

> Can it be that the gifts of the Creator may be thus misappropriated with impunity? . . . Turn to history, and on every page may be read the lesson that such wrong never goes unpunished. . . . May we even say, "After us the deluge!" . . . The struggle that must either revivify, or convulse in ruin, is near at hand, if it be not already begun.

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> But if, while there is yet time, we turn to Justice and obey her, if we trust Liberty and follow her, the dangers that now threaten must disappear . . . . With want destroyed; with greed changed to noble passions; with the fraternity that is born of equality taking the place of jealousy and fear that now array men against each other; with mental power loosed by conditions that give to the humblest comfort and leisure; who shall measure the heights to which our civilization may soar? Words fail the thought! It is the Golden Age. . . . It is the culmination of Christianity—the city of God on earth. . . . It is the reign of the Prince of Peace!

Part III. Rights as Economic Obligations

Most economists today have only a passing acquaintance with Henry George's writings. So we should not be surprised when they sometimes portray him rather simplistically as a political moralist only, or an activist or a reformer, concerned about the injustice of rich 19th-century landholders who benefited from the desperate situation of their impoverished tenants. Such, for instance, is how Robert L. Heilbroner in his book *The Worldly Philosophers* (1980: 181–188) understood George when placing him among the underworld of Victorian economists and describing him as a person with little professional preparation or credentials who overemphasized the economic significance of speculation, saw land rent as a form of social extortion, and considered all social ills easily remedied by a single tax. But such is a caricature and does an injustice to a great man.

By the end of George's life († 1897), outside of the Bible more people were reading *Progress and Poverty* and George's other writings than any other English-language books. And George's popularity continued well into the 20th century.

What was the reason for such a reach? Certainly, George was a powerful thinker who could explain complex economic ideas with such clarity and reason that all could understand. John Dewey referred to Henry George as one of history's greatest social philosophers (Dewey 1928). And in a helpful recent article, Francis K. Peddle (2012) placed George's theory of natural law in the lineage of Cicero and the Stoics and in dialogue with the ethical naturalism of the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition. There was a philosophical underpinning to George's ideas that made him much more than an ideologue.

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But more so, George reached the men and women of his time because he tapped into the working-person's sense that the disparity in wealth between the haves and the have-nots (in that Gilded Age) was not as the Creator intended. Such disparity was not only unjust as men and women might judge but as God judged. In step with the Social Gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch and others, and previewing what would emerge with Latin American Liberation Theology (Andelson and Dawsey 1992), George's deep questions joined theology to economics. What makes for a just society? For a better world? George argued for a society that was structured differently. Society worked best when it accorded with the laws and rights established by God. If out of step with those laws and rights, if ignoring them, brokenness followed.

George's view of rights reflect his Christian heritage. Childhood included daily prayers, Sunday School, sermons, and Bible reading (George, Jr. 1981: 14, 15, 36, 41). As a young man, his faith was revitalized and he joined the Methodist Church (George, Jr. 1981: 103–104). He married a Roman Catholic and showed an ecumenical spirit throughout his life. He formed great friendships with the Roman Catholic priests Rev. Thomas Dawson and the Rev. Dr. Edward McGlynn (George, Jr. 1981: 311–312, 401–402, 493–494). He was devout, but not churchly. In later years he never abandoned his personal reverence for God and led his children in morning and evening prayers and joined in family hymn singing (George, Jr. 1981: 252). George's faith sustained him during times of suffering and privation (George, Jr. 1981: 132–133, 257).

Lectures on biblical themes were among George's most popular (George [1878] 1956). They give insight to the fountain of his thinking, for George's views on the goodness and fullness of creation, human nature, land ownership, stewardship, the brotherhood and sisterhood of people, the value of life, equality of opportunity, respect for labor, the demand for freedom, the relationship between liberty and responsibility, and necessity for justice spring from the Bible, especially as interpreted through the Christianity of his upbringing.

Henry George's (1887) address "Thou Shalt Not Steal" was delivered on a Sunday evening in May at the Second Public Meeting of the Anti-Poverty Society in New York. The speaker the previous Sunday

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had been the Rev. Dr. Edward McGlynn, who had spoken on how to abolish poverty. And George began his address by joining the appeal for men "to join together and work together, to bring the Kingdom of God on earth" (George 1887: 3). He referred to religious sentiment as "the sentiment alone of all sentiments powerful enough to regenerate the world" (George 1887: 3).

George (1887: 3–5) answered newspaper objections to the work of the Society that there was not enough wealth to go around by pointing to the great fortunes that some possessed and by proposing not so much to redivide wealth as create more of it. To the objection that poverty had always existed, he pointed to how poverty actually was increasing as wealth increased. And to the claim that the reduction of poverty should be left to charitable institutions, he responded that what he proposed was justice, not charity. Social institutions should conform to the Creator's laws of what was right. That God did not wish people to suffer poverty could be known as any natural fact. God's laws were social as well as physical. "He, the Creator of all, has given us room for all, work for all, plenty for all."

Doing justice meant abolishing "poverty by the sovereign remedy of doing to others as we would have others do to us, by giving all their just rights" (George 1887: 5). To the objection that there is not work enough for all, George responded that all have a right to productive work, which "is simply the application of human labor to land." Opportunity for work is denied because those who would work are being barred access to nature's storehouse—"because what the Creator intended for all has been made the property of the few" (George 1887: 6). Poverty would not end unless the natural opportunities for labor that were being withheld from workers were made equally available to all.

George (1887: 6–8) then affirmed "the sacred right of property," that is, "that right which gives to everyone a just right of property in what he has produced." Land was intended by the Creator for all. But he departed from Locke by insisting that work can never produce ownership of the "city lot, or that great tract of agricultural land, or that coal mine, or that gas well." "How do we know that the Almighty is against poverty?" he asked. George quoted scripture: It is because God

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declared, "Thou shalt not steal." And poverty existed in the midst of overflowing wealth, he continued, because of "a system that legalizes theft," by sanctioning those who controlled natural resources to steal work from laborers who were denied access to the storehouse God intended to benefit all. The result were multitudes of women working in sweatshops, children raised in squalor, thousands for whom the future held no promise except the penitentiary or the brothel. There were other forms of stealing than picking pockets or burglary, he explained. Not stealing meant "that we shall not take that to which we are not entitled, to the detriment of others."

The command not to steal applied not only to the individual, George (1887: 9–10) explained, but to the community as a whole. Thus, God's commandment also intended that "we must not suffer anybody else to steal if we can help it." People who permitted others to monopolize land participated in stealing by denying access to what rightfully belonged to all. Thus, they denied opportunity for work and ensured that wages were artificially low. And "the Christianity that ignores this social responsibility has really forgotten the teachings of Christ." At the center of Christian teaching was not the individual's concern for his or her own salvation, but "Do what you can to make this a better world for all!" Instead of the individual's autonomy, George focused on community: "the proclamation of a common Fatherhood of God and a common Brotherhood of Men."

Last, in his speech, George (1887: 11–12) addressed a form of theft that was often overlooked. He pointed out how land values increase as communities grow and civilization progresses (George 1887: 11). This followed a natural law put into place by the Creator, intended to provide for the social needs of the community. For since the whole population of New York City, for instance, created the value of land in the city, should not every person who lives there and added to that value not also get some benefit from it? That value rightly should be taken over by the community through taxes. And from the funds raised, widows, orphans, and others experiencing need could be provided for, not as charity, but "as co-heirs of a vast estate."

But instead, what happened? Individuals appropriated for themselves what rightly belongs to all. And the theft from the community was increased by speculators who bought large tracts of land and held

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the land fallow, denying others proper use, just waiting for the value of the land to increase so that they might resell it for profit (George 1887: 15–17).

George closed with the following appeal:

> We have a long fight and a hard fight before us. Possibly, probably, for many of us, we may never see it come to success. But what of that? It is a privilege to be engaged in such a struggle. This we may know, that it is but a part of that great, world-wide long continued struggle in which the just and the good of every age have been engaged: and that we, in taking part in it, are doing something in our humble way to bring on earth the Kingdom of God, to make the conditions of life for those who come afterward, those which we trust will prevail in heaven. (George 1887: 17–18)

Part IV. Rights as the Fruits of Natural Law

Henry George connected natural law and natural rights in a manner consonant with his religious tradition: men and women are completely free under God but also completely responsible to God's creation. Natural rights followed from obedience to natural law.

At the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, the great Martin Luther framed the double affirmation with these words:

> A Christian man is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to no one else.
> And a Christian man is a perfectly free servant of all, subject to everyone. (1520, Concerning Christian Liberty)

Liberty

Freedom, for Luther, depended strictly on people's relation to the source of freedom. He argued that all men, not just Christians, were under the Creator's demand for justice (1520, *A Treatise on Good Works*). The demand for justice was a natural law that applied universally. Although the demand for justice was clear in the Old and New Testaments, "both nature and love alike teach that I should act toward others as I would wish to be treated by them" (1523).

In the Episcopalian tradition of George's youth and in the Wesleyan tradition of his adult life, we encounter a similar commitment to obligation accompanying natural law. Richard Hooker († 1600), who laid the foundation in the Anglican community, joined revelation and

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tradition to reason as avenues for knowing the will of God. In *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Hooker ([1593] 1888: BK 1, Ch. 8, ¶3) insisted on natural law:

> For that which all men have at all times learned, Nature herself must needs have taught; and God being the author of Nature, her voice is but his instrument. By her from Him we receive whatsoever in such sort we learn. . . . By force of the light of reason, wherewith God illuminateth every one which cometh into the world, men being enabled to know truth from falsehood, and good from evil, do thereby learn in many things what the will of God is; which will Himself not revealing by any extraordinary means unto them, but they by natural discourse attaining the knowledge thereof, seem the makers of those Laws, which indeed are his and they only the finders of them out.

For Hooker ([1593] 1888: BK I, Ch. 8, ¶7), the content of natural law included rationality, religion, and morality. Under morality, he summed up the law of nature as teaching that it is men's "duty no less to love others than themselves."

Methodist epistemology likewise affirmed natural law (Outler 1985; Abraham 1985). Alongside of John Wesley, George would have thought that there were a variety of ways of knowing God's truth. For Wesley, the historical life, ministry, and death of Jesus provided our clearest insight into the nature and will of God. The Gospels told about Jesus. But there were many paths to knowing our place in creation. The Word of God was present through the scriptures. Reason allowed insight, for as people's minds were created in the image and likeness of God, our thoughts (when thinking rationally) paralleled God's thoughts. This allowed for a natural understanding of good and evil, right and wrong, to all humans regardless of whether ever hearing of Christ or his teachings. The sciences allowed insight into the divine—as did the visual and performing arts, imagination, and beauty. The study of history helped us perceive God, for God is active in history. More so with Methodists than Episcopalians, feelings—longings and yearnings, moments of joy, despair, hope, and trust—gave insight into the divine will.

The Methodism of George's adulthood, even more than the Episcopalianism of his youth, emphasized the free will of the believer. Wesley was Armenian in that he believed that while God knew the future, he did not control it. As with Luther, the individual was

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completely free to respond to or deny God's grace. But also the path to sanctification with Wesley presented a continual process of free choice. Every act, every moment provided an opportunity to love when not-loving presented an equal possibility. The Christian's free will was such, in fact, that the individual's choices, when joined to the grace of God, could lead to perfect love (Wesley 1760a: Sermon #40).

Service

Freedom, for Wesley, carried over to the social sphere. In 1774, he wrote a tract attacking slavery that was widely read (Wesley 1774). *Thoughts upon Slavery* went through four editions in two years. In it, Wesley suggested the boycott of rum and sugar and followed up by supporting the creation of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787. Another writing, "Testimony Against Slavery" (Long 1857: 406–407), is even better remembered today:

> Give liberty to whom liberty is due, that is, to every child of man, to every partaker of human nature. Let none serve you but by his own act and deed, by his own voluntary action. Away with all whips, all chains, all compulsion. Be gentle toward all men; and see that you invariably do with every one as you would he should do unto you.

Love manifested itself in service to humankind. Wesley not only fought against slavery. He opposed child labor, the working conditions of chimney sweeps and mine workers, living conditions in tenements. He pushed for prison reform and better schooling for the poor. In one of his sermons based on the text of Matthew 25, "For I was hungry, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and in prison and ye came unto me" Wesley (1760c), referred to good works as "the perfection of religion" (Sermon #99):

> They are the highest part of that spiritual building whereof Jesus Christ is the foundation. . . . The highest of all Christian graces . . . is properly and directly the love of our neighbor. And to him who attentively consider the whole tenor both of the Old and New Testament, it will be equally plain, that works springing from this love are the highest part of the religion therein revealed. Of these our Lord himself says, "Hereby is my Father glorified, that ye bring forth much fruit."

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Wesley referred to service to his fellow man as following in the Lord's footsteps. The Christian, he thought, was liberated in order to serve. Wesley was not opposed to making money, but presented an interesting twist on capitalism by preaching that "having first, gained all you can, and, secondly saved all you can, then give all you can" (Wesley 1760b: Sermon #50). In a follow-up sermon, "The Causes of Inefficacy of Christianity" (Wesley 1760d: Sermon #116), he decried that few Methodists kept his third dictum and urged his congregation to leave only half of their savings as inheritance to their children and to apply the other half in support of the poor in society. Wesley himself adopted the guide of keeping only 10 percent of his earnings for himself while giving 90 percent for use of charity and evangelism.

Equality

Henry George's affirmation of radical freedom and radical responsibility to neighbor and community was rooted in his particular religious heritage. Also, his ideas about human equality and his own vocation would have been nourished there.

From its inception, Christianity held that all people were equal in that they were created equal. For the early Church writers, that men and women were created in the image of God indicated a connection joining our rational minds and especially our ability to love to God himself. And that humans were created in the likeness of God indicated that we could develop our minds, grow in love, and generally progress on our pilgrimage to Heaven. But as Albert Outler (1955:21–23) has pointed out, the Protestant tradition radicalized this equality between people in a manner not present during the Middle Ages:

1. The avowal of justification by faith through grace pushed the brotherhood and sisterhood of believers further by emphasizing how all are equally dependent on God for salvation. Justification occurred to individuals as they stood in the presence of God. The Holy Spirit could come to anyone, speak to anyone, touch anyone. No person's position before God was to be traced to birth, family name, or standing in society.

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2. A leveling between people also occurred because Protestants emphasized the sinful nature of man. Luther used the image of men and women being like sows in the mud, while at the same time being sons and daughters of God. Following the Apostle Paul and Augustine of Hippo, Protestants emphasized that all people are sinful. This does not mean that Protestants did not continue to recognize different degrees of conduct, holding, for instance, murder to be worse than gossip. But, it did signify all equally needed God's grace. No one merited salvation. Man's sinfulness was such that all equally deserved death but were equally saved only through faith.
3. And finally, by affirming the priesthood of all believers, Protestants extended equality between ministers (as they became titled) and laity. All Christians, according to the Protestant tradition, are "a royal priesthood and a holy nation" (I Peter 2:9). Every Christian has a right and a responsibility to fulfill the duties of the priestly office. The need to mediate prayers and petitions, confessions of sin, and God's response disappeared. Laity and ministers were equally priests one to another. All became equally responsible for the congregation. When standing before God, there no longer existed any in-kind distinction between those who had been ordained and those who had not.

Vocation

Everywhere in Henry George's biography we encounter a man with a vocation. He was not driven by fame or fortune, but by a desire to help make the world better. His sense of calling is quite clear in a letter that he wrote to his friend, the Rev. Thomas Dawson, explaining what drove him to write *Progress and Poverty* (George, 1981: 311–312):

> Because you are not only my friend, but a priest and a religious, I shall say something that I don't like to speak of—that I never before have told to any one. Once, in daylight, and in a city street, there came to me a thought, a vision, a call—give it what name you please. But every nerve quivered. And there and then I made a vow. Through evil and through good, whatever I have done and whatever I have left undone, to that I have been true. It was that that impelled me to write *Progress and Poverty* and that

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> sustained me when else I should have failed. And when I had finished the last page, in the dead of the night, when I was entirely alone, I flung myself on my knees and wept like a child. The rest was in the Master's hands. That is a feeling that has never left me; that is constantly with me. And it has led me up and up. It has made me a better and a purer man. It has been to me a religion, strong and deep.

George's Wesleyan heritage parted with medieval Christianity in how best to answer Jesus' command to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). Instead of separating from the world and leading a life of contemplation and devotion through a monastic order, Christians were to invest themselves in others and in the world. The business world, the home, the schoolhouse were all proper places to glorify God. Christians were to engage their powers in useful labor to God.

George's conception of rights rests upon the conviction that the Creator had provided a storehouse that would satisfy every physical need when used as intended. Creation was ordered and operated through discernible laws. People played a special role in creation: human labor transformed the raw gifts of nature, multiplying and increasing their benefit. Through creative imaginations and work, people, thus, participated with God in crafting a good world. People were also entrusted by the Creator to be stewards of creation, caring for everything in the world and making sure that this storehouse delighted and benefited future generations. The purposes of the Creator in these regards were not a mystery. God had revealed them through his actions in history, through covenants, numerous spokespersons, and Sacred Writ. And since men and women were created in the image of God, beauty, intuition, and an innate sense of justice gave clues as to human rights and responsibilities. Reason, especially, provided a natural understanding of men's and women's place in creation. From God's storehouse, creatures were intended to experience life in abundance. But because of greed or fear or rebellion or mostly ignorance, people often did not use the Creator's gifts as intended. Social structures had become warped. In theological terms, sin had distorted the intent of creation. And the result was a world filled with unnecessary suffering, poverty, a deep divide between the

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haves and the have-nots. But social injustices could be rectified if people would restructure society along the lines intended by the Creator.

Given this theological scaffolding, we can readily understand why George considered certain rights to be self-evident, in no need of defense as human rights. And it is easy to see why he thought that these rights did not rest upon agreements between rulers and citizens, or duties that we assume. To be precise, natural rights were neither symptoms nor benefits accruing from society. Rather, natural rights were elements in the design of the universe. Certain rights that we enjoy are natural rights in that they pertain to us in the similar manner to flesh and bones, our minds, hopes, desire to work and create. In George's way of thinking, such rights weren't added to people like a cloak or a vestment but are part of men and women as we were created to be.

Can these rights be named and enumerated? Yes and no. Similar to the way the Hebrew prophets and Jesus himself focused on essential instruction in the Torah, George identified certain core rights such as liberty, life, equality of opportunity, and justice. And sometimes in his writings and speeches he also listed core abuses: injustice, slavery, theft, etc. But the lists are never comprehensive. They did not function for him as collections of individual virtues or vices, each to be approached singly. For George, natural rights are like fruits on a tree. They are part of the tree; they grow from it, yet are distinguishable from the tree. A healthy apple tree will produce bushels of apples during the year. But if torn by a storm or if withered from drought, it will bear few fruit—maybe none. So, natural rights characterize people when society abides by natural law or the Creator's will. When people live in a proper relationship with one another, when the tree is strong, natural rights abound. But when natural law is contravened, society becomes deformed and natural rights wither.

Conclusion: A Century After Henry George

Although Henry George approached natural rights and natural law from his Protestant, Episcopalian, Methodist heritage, his joining of rights to obligations is a common theme in Christianity. As mentioned,

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some of George's closest supporters were activist Roman Catholic priests. He lived, however, at a time when Roman Catholicism saw itself influencing the world mainly through indirect influence, as a Mother and a Teacher (Andelson and Dawsey 1992: 28–32). By educating the children of the elite and giving moral training to the leaders of society, those born to rule, the Church hoped to direct society on a proper course.

George's work coincided with the beginning of a shift in the Church toward greater direct involvement with social justice issues. It was during George's life that Pope Leo XIII wrote the first of the great social encyclicals, *Rerum Novarum* (1891). In it, Pope Leo argued that it was the function of the state to bring about justice, that is, provide for the common good, and to do this the state should protect the rights and insist on the duties of its citizens. To improve the rights of workers the encyclical suggested that workers should be given the right to unionize (or form Christian associations) and employers should provide men, women, and children with suitable jobs, fair wages, etc. The encyclical maintained the right of the lords and great landholders to own property but stated that responsibilities also accompanied ownership: sharing and charity. The encyclical maintained class divisions but dignified the poor by reminding that Jesus called them blessed. The Church's role in bringing about a better society, Leo claimed, was modeled through Christian living and handed down through the Church's teachings.

In "The Condition of Labor: An Open Letter to Pope Leo XIII" (George, 1965), Henry George offered a comprehensive reminder of the origin of the real right of property through labor. And he reminded the pope that the land (and all natural resources) were created by God for everyone's benefit. Proper ownership of land rests only with God. All Christians were called to be stewards of God's creation. While the encyclical had proposed only half-hearted measures in that they left the economic structures that already existed intact, George then proposed true reform: a landvalue tax as the best way of society taking for itself what God intended for all.

Did Pope Leo XIII ever read George's Open Letter? If he did, he did not answer George directly or enter into conversation with him. But half a century later, it became clear that the Church's position on the

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union of human rights and obligations had moved much closer to Henry George. For, Pope John XXIII's Encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963) unites natural law, natural rights, and duties in a way consonant with George's thinking.

Pacem in Terris was written at a time of tremendous world-tension, a time of cold war. Nuclear proliferation presented a threat to survival. And both the capitalism of the United States and Europe and the communism of the Soviet Union battled for an ever greater sphere of influence. The encyclical's subject was Peace on Earth. How can there be true peace—not just the absence of war, but the kind of peace that God desires for His creation?

True peace will come, *Pacem in Terris* claimed, only when people and states observe the order that God established at creation. It is an order that we can perceive in progress and change, through reason and science. It is an order that we can harness for mankind's benefit. Natural law shows how people should relate to each other and to the rest of creation and how states should relate one to another.

John XXIII listed human rights that accompanied creation (paragraphs 11–38). As with George, his list was not comprehensive but instead offered examples. In other words, like George, the encyclical gave insight into the types of rights that characterize human life when the world operates the way it should. The rights John XXIII listed included the right to preserve and develop life; the right to an education; the right to be respected; the right to freedom; the right to worship; the right to support when raising a family; the right to work; the right to ownership of property; the right to association; the right to travel; and the right to participate in public life. And like Henry George, John XXIII indicated how rights must be accompanied by corresponding duties that also must be observed if society is to be healthy. The most important of these duties, the encyclical claimed, was the golden rule, respecting the other.

John XXIII presented a wonderful vision of the world as it should be. But today, 60 years after *Pacem in Terris*, are we closer to this age of peace? Henry George actually had offered something more than even does *Pacem in Terris*, an idea that if followed would truly bring a more wonderful world.

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It was when offering an answer to the practical question of how to bring about peace that *Pacem in Terris* fell short. Like so many of our own time, John XXIII suggested that if individuals and states would practice human rights, do justice, then peace would emerge. Very well. But how to get individuals and states to pursue the practice of justice? Ultimately, the encyclical fell back on the approach of *Rerum Novarum* of George's time, hoping that the moral persuasion of the Church would bring about change. Change would occur through good-willed people tackling individual rights, one by one, and convincing their governments to do the same in their relationships with other governments. It would be by respecting rights that true peace would come on earth.

Henry George certainly agreed that rights needed to be respected. But how do good-willed people and governments bring about a more just society? What George proposed was both more radical and more workable than persuasion. He proposed an approach that had worked in our country before his time in abolishing slavery and that has worked since his time in bringing civil rights to a new generation of Americans. He proposed realigning the structure of economic society so that it would be in keeping with the design of creation. He proposed (1) changing the popular concept of the ownership of property and also (2) changing the laws governing ownership—that is, tax laws. If men and women would re-imagine their ideas on property, distinguishing what God intended for all from the product of our labor, and also change the tax laws that govern the ownership and use of land and other natural resources to accord with that truer imagination, then a new world would emerge. As Pope John XXIII envisioned, it would be a human society inhabited by greater peace, truer peace. There would be greater prosperity; less suffering; more justice. And the natural rights and duties of men and women would abound. They would be as plentiful as apples produced by a good tree.

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