

CHAPTER 15 — MORAL CONFUSIONS AS TO WEALTH

As to the desire for wealth in the politico-economic sense, as I have described it, there is nothing sordid or mean. Wealth, on the contrary, is a perfectly legitimate object of desire and effort. To obtain it is simply to increase the powers of the individual over nature, and is prompted by the same essentially noble desire as in any way to increase our powers or our knowledge, or in any way to raise ourselves above the level of the mere animal, from which we start; while no one can increase his own wealth by increasing value from production, without at the same time doing something for everyone else.

How then is it that wealth is so widely regarded askance by our moral perceptions; that we are told that we should not seek it, and hardly even use it; that the highest expressions of our deepest knowledge look at it so contemptuously, and that political economy, which is the science of the nature, production and exchange of wealth, should be so widely regarded as a selfish and hard science? If we go into this question at all we must go deeper than has yet, I think, been done.

There is a distinction on which our examination of wealth and value may throw light, the distinction we commonly make between the rich and the poor. We mean by a rich man a man who has much that has value, that is to say, much wealth or much power of commanding wealth or services from others. And by a poor man we mean a man who possesses little or nothing of such value. But where is the line of division between rich and poor? There is no line distinctly recognized in common thought, and a man is called rich or poor according to the standard of average comfort prevailing in the society or rather the grade of society in which the estimate is made. There are circles of human life in New York City in which no

man would be deemed poor who could see his way to a night's lodging and breakfast in the morning, and there are other circles in which a Vanderbilt could say that a man possessed of only \$1 million could with economy live as comfortably as though he were rich.

But is there not some line the recognition of which will enable us to say with something like scientific precision that this man is rich and that man is poor? It seems to me that there must be. And if we stop to think of it, we may see that there is.

If we set aside for the moment the narrower economic meaning of service (by which direct service is conveniently distinguished from the indirect service embodied in wealth), we may resolve all the things which indirectly satisfy human desire into one term, service; just as we resolve fractions into a common denominator. Now, is there not a natural or normal line of the possession or enjoyment of service? Clearly there is. It is that of equality between giving and receiving. This is the equilibrium which Confucius expressed in the golden word of his teaching that in English we translate into "reciprocity." Naturally the services which a member of human society is entitled to receive from other members are the equivalents of those he renders to others. Here is a normal line from which what we call wealthiness and what we call poverty take their start. He who can command more service than he need render, is rich. He is poor, who can command less service than he does render or is willing to render; for in our civilization of today we must take note of the monstrous fact that men willing to work cannot always find opportunity to work. Rich and poor are thus correlatives of each other — the existence of a class of rich involving the existence of a class of poor, and the reverse. Abnormal luxury on the one side and abnormal want on the other have a relation of necessary sequence. To put this relation into terms of morals, the rich are the robbers,

since they are at least sharers in the proceeds of robbery; and the poor are the robbed.

This is the reason, I take it, why Christ, who was not really a man of such reckless speech as some Christians deem Him to have been, always expressed sympathy with the poor and repugnance of the rich. In His philosophy it was better even to be robbed than to rob. In the kingdom of right-doing which He preached, rich and poor would be impossible, because rich and poor in the true sense are the results of wrongdoing. And when He said, "it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven!" He simply put in the emphatic forms of Eastern metaphor a statement of fact as coldly true as the statement that two parallel lines can never meet.

Injustice cannot live where justice rules, and so it is utterly impossible in this, or in any other conceivable world, to abolish unjust poverty, without at the same time abolishing unjust possessions. This is a hard word to the softly amiable philanthropists who, to speak metaphorically, would like to get on the good side of God without angering the devil. But it is a true word nevertheless.