

· C O M M E N T ·

On Justice as an Economic Concept

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HERBERT JOHNSON, in his article entitled "Economics and Ethics" (AMERICAN JOURNAL OF ECONOMICS AND SOCIOLOGY, January, 1950, page 217) holds that economics is an autonomous science that must be tied to the science of ethics. He maintains that economics supplies the means, ethics the end or goal to be achieved. Economics, he says, deals with facts that are true; ethics with what *ought* to be. Therefore, he concludes, the economist supplies the factual matter which ethics requires, but ethics is concerned with what man conceives to be the ultimate goal.

The concept of Johnson as to economics is limited to the production and distribution of wealth.¹ If the economist would mention "justice," Johnson would argue that this is an end to be achieved and invades the sphere of ethics.

So, likewise, might it be held as an end to be achieved if man seeks to survive. Is the desire for justice different from the desire to survive? If, within the sphere of economics, the science which treats of wealth and the natural laws governing its production and distribution by man in society, the desire of man to survive is accepted as a prerequisite, then it will be shown that man's seeking justice in the realm of production and distribution is likewise a prerequisite and does not betoken the inferiority of economics as an autonomous science to ethics.

Were there no men, there would be no science of economics or ethics, as these are predicated upon the existence of generic man. Man with all his attributes is a prerequisite to these and other social sciences. Were there but one individual man, these sciences likewise would be impossible. Therefore, the existence of society is also prerequisite.

Among the attributes of generic man is the desire for survival. Another attribute is that man seeks to satisfy his desires with the least exertion. This principle of least effort is recognized as an inherent part of man in every field of his endeavor. Not alone in producing material

¹ *Op. cit.*, *supra*, "The modern science of economics analyzes and describes the past and present efforts of men to acquire and use material wealth, and seeks whatever laws this analysis can be made to reveal."

goods (wealth), but in the gratification of aesthetic, artistic and cultural pursuits.

George Kingsley Zipf of Harvard University in a scholarly treatise² proves that "From the moment that an organism begins to live, he attempts to survive with least effort in the environment in which he finds himself, and by means of the tools and matter-energy at his disposal."³ Professor Zipf recognizes that an individual organism may exert more effort (work) than is needed to survive at a given time. He says "an organism at a given instant may have many choices of action, some of which may be of least work today and yet initiate a course of action which will by no means represent least work tomorrow. Since the existence of the organism is continual, then a life of least work will be one in which the expenditure of work over time is minimized; that is, the organism will minimize its average rate of work over time."⁴

Summarizing, Professor Zipf points out "This concept of least effort we discussed in our opening chapter. There we pointed out that an organism, in order to minimize its work throughout life, may not adopt a course of action today that minimizes its work today unless that course of action will also probably lead to successive courses of action in the future whose probable sum total of work expenditure will also be a minimum for the organism. In other words, we may say that an organism takes a path that will minimize its own probable average rate of work. For convenience we have expressed this by saying that all organisms behave with least effort."⁵

Although man *seeks* to gratify his desires with the least effort, his ability to do so is always limited by his knowledge of and possession of the means to be employed.

In his desire to survive, man requires food, shelter and clothing. The evolution of civilization, the cultural pattern of man's behavior, the very existence of society may be traced to man's desire for these necessities to survival. So, it will be shown that the concept of justice is but an evolutionary concept of man's desire to survive.

Primitive man satisfied his hunger from the fauna and flora of his environment. He had no concepts of "property rights," nor in satisfying his mating instincts did the modern concepts of relations between the

² "Human Behavior and the Principle of Least Effort," Addison-Wesley Press, Inc., 1949.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 340.

sexes motivate him. When one individual succeeded in killing a food animal he feasted until sated. A prudent man might realize that by saving a part of the uneaten meat he would reduce the efforts he need exert in the near future when hunger again beckoned. But other men near him knew he killed the food animal and would seek their gratification from it. In order to save part for the future, he might be compelled to remain awake armed with weapons to repel an invader of his food supply.

Likewise, if a particular female gratified his desire for a mate, he might be loathe to lose her to a predatory neighbor. Again, to retain her he might be compelled to remain awake armed with weapons to repel an invader of his domestic circle.

Perhaps his experiences were shared by others. Watchful preparedness to repel aggressors required the expenditure of effort. Perhaps from some fertile brain, or perhaps simultaneously from several the idea was first set forth, then discussed and then adopted that "if you will not take from me the meat of a food animal I kill, I will not take from you the meat of a food animal you kill." And then "if you will not take from me 'my' female, I will not take 'yours'."

Here was a *quid pro quo*, an agreement to do or abstain from doing, given by one in exchange for a like agreement by another. The motive for such agreements was to save the expenditure of effort by each contracting party in his desire to survive.

Thus, the two "instincts," the two attributes of man were the hidden force which called into being these compacts.

It may be argued that there is no scientific proof available that these compacts were, in fact, ever made. True! But empirical proof is available that in the evolution of society, these agreements were made and recognized. In practically every one of the religions extant we find some form of what is known as the "Golden Rule"; "Do unto others that which they should do unto you" or the Oriental version "Do not unto others what you would not have them do unto you." The Oriental version is but a paraphrase of the compacts which our early ancestors made. These concepts for human relations come to us from very ancient sources. In essence, they are the epitome of all that the word or concept of "justice" implies.

Justice, then, had its origin, not in an advanced code of ethics, but in primitive man's desire to survive with the least expenditure of effort.

In the world today there is a deplorable degree of the absence of justice, so the concept is deemed an "end to be sought" an ultimate goal. In

reality, a regime of equality of opportunity, an absence of coercion of one by another, of "do not unto others what you would not have them do unto you" would be a fulfillment of the two basic attributes of man, to survive and to do so with least expenditure of effort.

The economist, concerned with the science which treats of wealth and the laws governing its production and distribution by men in society, may properly posit justice as a prerequisite to the full and free operation of the laws of his science, noting deviations from justice and the effects thereof upon results achieved.

Rather than viewing justice as the end sought or goal to be achieved, thus putting it within the orbit of ethics, if it is accepted as the prerequisite to the full and free operation of the laws of economics then the economist can be the trained expert whose counsel and advice can lead the world out of its labyrinth of confusion and waste. He will then be not an automatic gatherer of statistics and graphs, but the counselor which the world sorely needs.

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The Road Ahead

THE FEELING IS UNIVERSAL that Russia is our greatest enemy. There is no question but that Russia is our obvious enemy, but our greatest enemy is an idea. That idea is communism with its retreat from freedom and liberty of the individual. If the great war should materialize and Russia and her satellites were vanquished, communism would still be here. Moreover, in the process of carrying on that war, we ourselves would continue down the road of the all-powerful State.

Our short-term problem is to win both the hot and cold wars which are upon us. Our long-run problem is to be the vanguard of the race of free men, which means a radical realignment of the economic policies of the State. Interference with free market relationships of agricultural products, raw materials, and finished goods, to achieve real freedom, must be gradually ended. Natural laws must be discovered and followed in economics just as they have been discovered and followed in mathematics, physics, chemistry and astronomy.

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