

The Living Spirit and the Economic Man

IS THE HUMAN SPIRIT, the concept of the "free spirit of man" which has been advanced by truly democratic reformers, within the scope of economics as a realistic science? Rudolph Christoph Eucken, the German philosopher (1846–1926), addressed himself to this problem in a passage in his "Socialism: An Analysis" (tr. by Joseph McCabe, New York, Scribner's 1922, pp. 169–70):

It is one of the limitations of Socialism that in its economism it knows no such thing as independent spirituality, or treats it merely as an appendage of the material. Hence even in the best cases Socialists must put material prosperity in the first place. This means a lowering of the standard of things which require an independent spirituality, and an absence of independent contacts.

Here we have the fundamental error of this naturalistic Monism. It regards the psychic life as merely a process in individual minds, and recognizes no connection through a common life. When it thus confines its attention to individuals, it can justly claim that the individual life is closely associated with others, and that even the frontiers between animal and human life are not rigid. But it fails to appreciate the profound fact that in the case of man the psychic life does not consist of separate points; it runs together into a common life. This common life has an extraordinarily rich content, and it has quite different features from those of nature. It is this connectedness that makes history and society in the strict human sense possible; it alone gives rise to conceptual language and culture, and facilitates the branching of culture into the independent provinces of law, morals, art, and science. It is, in fact, only in this soil that an independent economic life is possible; for there is a vital difference between the mere natural impulse to assert oneself in the struggle for life and the effort to bring about a common economic order. The main idea of the latter presupposes a spiritual and independent activity. The mere clash of natural impulses could never lead to the construction of an economic life.

Naturalistic economism shares with materialistic naturalism the defect of treating natural existence as the chief world, and then applying to its intellectual adaptation powers of thought which are unintelligible within the bounds of nature. This contradiction in theory leads to contradiction in action. Concern about the material world cannot be regarded by a spiritual being as the main object of life.

For its provocativeness alone, Eucken's passage deserves to be better known to students of the social sciences.

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