

## ETHICS AND ECONOMICS OF POOR RELIEF.

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THE Report of the Commission appointed to inquire into the administration of the Irish Poor Law is in many ways a remarkable document. It criticises with frankness, unusual in publications of its kind, the existing law, and does not spare its censure of the statesman by whom that law was framed. The main purpose of the Report is the reform of existing institutions, a better practical ordering of our existing system of Poor Relief. The recommendations in this respect appear to be eminently sane and sound, and our legislators, if they take up the subject, will find light and guidance in them. But it is not to the changes in our Workhouse system proposed in the Report that I would now direct attention. From the point of view of Social Economics the introductory sections of the Report are by far the most important. They raise issues of much wider range than those specifically submitted to the Commission, they point to principles which lie at the basis of all legislation on behalf of the poor, and at once justify such legislation and determine its character.

What is the basis of the claim of the poor to relief at the cost of the well-to-do members of the community? What is the extent of those claims, that is to say, what measure of relief are the poor warranted in claiming? In what way does the nature of these claims indicate the manner in which the obligations of the community towards the poor among its members are to be discharged?

Discussing these questions we shall obtain a general view of a problem which present-day conditions have made urgent, and we may be able to reach some conclusions which will assist us in appraising the findings of the Commission and realising more fully their significance.

To begin with the first question I have suggested, it must be counted remarkable that we find in the literature of Political Philosophy, so few attempts at a reasoned account of the State's duties to the poor. It seems to be taken for granted—at least by the modern writers who have recognised such duties—that the State has an obvious obligation to relieve needy members of the community in their distress. But what, we may ask, is the basis of this obligation? How does it arise out of the relations which subsist between organised society,

acting through its government, and the individuals who are included within the organisation? If civil society exists—as some would maintain—merely to protect the rights and assure the freedom of its members, how is the function of positively aiding the indigent to be inferentially required from the State authorities? If non-interference is the rule which binds government itself and which it is set up to impose upon others, on what grounds can it undertake to compel the possessors of wealth to part with their property for the benefit of the needy?

It appears obvious that no theory of the State which regards Government authority as the sum of individual liberties surrendered by the citizens, or which limits Government action to the protection of individual rights, can consistently impose upon Government, or even allow it to undertake, the Relief of the Poor.

We may then assert, logically, that the conceptions of the State which we owe to Hobbes, Rousseau, and Bentham, leave no room for the exercise of public charity, and, further, that our Irish system of Poor Relief, set up at a time when the theories of Bentham were in fashion, was then, and still is, a standing protest against the fundamental principles of that master.

That we may ascribe to the State the Relief of the Poor as one of its functions, we have to enlarge our notion of the end of civil society much beyond the utilitarian limit. We have to revert to that conception of the State formulated by Aristotle, that the State exists in order to furnish man with the larger facilities for cultivating the faculties of his nature which civil society alone can provide—the faculties for leading a perfect life, as the Greek Philosopher puts it. Organised society can do, by combined effort, what individuals acting separately cannot accomplish for themselves, and it is to secure for each and all the benefits of combined action that civil communities exist. In political associations the virtues of human character and the moral needs of human nature remain what they were in the earlier family unions, and the communities that grew out of these, but the range of the activities of the individual is wider in the larger organisation, and his sympathies and sense of fellowship extend over a broader field.

Membership in a body politic does not exempt him from any of the obligations which his nature dictates to him in less highly developed social conditions; in respect to these obligations it merely furnishes him with the means of fulfilling them more adequately.

Benevolence, in the form of sympathy with distress, is an essential virtue of human nature, so essential and so distinctive that in the English language it has come to be named “humanity.” The practice of it is universally recognised as meritorious, and the neglect of it is universally reprobated.

The principle has already been laid down that what individuals are warranted in doing, or what they are in duty obliged to do, the State, where its action is specially effective for such purpose, may aid them in doing or do for them. From this principle it follows that the State, by collective action, may aid in giving effect to the humanitarian dispositions of its citizens; to put the same thing in other words, the distress of the poor may be relieved by the public authorities at the public expense. I do not insist that this is one of the primary functions of Government, nor will anyone maintain that it is prominent in the earlier and simpler forms of civil society. But as civilization advances and social conditions become more complex and State administration deals with a wider range of interests, provision for the indigent will necessarily become a concern of Government. This development may, however, be delayed by the action of other causes. Benevolence, as a moral virtue, is closely akin to religion, and the practice of it is inculcated by all religions worthy of the name. In nations where religious systems profoundly influence public life the alms-giving prescribed by religion may be adequate to relieve the necessities of the indigent. This was the case among the primitive nations of the East, was the case among the Jews, and is still the case among the Mohammedans who remain faithful to the precepts of the Koran. In the Christian system kindness to the poor is a fundamental virtue; it is even the test and gauge of the Christian spirit. In the ages when Christianity inspired the civilization, and moulded the social ideals, of the Western nations, alms-giving, as a religious observance, made a system of State relief unnecessary. Hospitals, asylums, orphanages, were maintained at the cost of the wealthy, and relief in other forms was bestowed with generosity if not always with prudence. But the confiscation of ecclesiastical property which accompanied the religious revolution of the 16th century, took out of the hands of the Church the patrimony of the poor; it may be questioned whether the poor have not had reason to regret the change.

When I speak of the relief of the poor as a function of the State, I understand by the poor those to whom indigence is a misfortune, not a matter of choice. There are those who are needy only because they are too indolent to supply their own wants, who prefer to suffer rather than to work. To these the State owes no duty except that of correction. They are offenders against the primary law of our human condition which ordains that we shall earn by labour the bread we eat, and their endeavour to make themselves pensioners of society is a fraud which should be met by punishment, not by sympathy. The appropriate punishment is forced labour, not as a permanent condition, but as a temporary discipline, under which habits of idleness shall be corrected and foundations of

character laid which will be a guarantee against a relapse. The labour should not be wholly penal. It should be genuinely productive, and the produce, while maintaining the worker, should also provide a fund which would eventually furnish him with the means of starting on a career of independence when he could be trusted to persevere in it. For the class under consideration, a Labour Reformatory is the institution needed, and it is one of the serious defects of our legislative system that no institution of this kind has been provided for a class which is always a burden and frequently a danger to the community.

The suggestion here put forward accords with the suggestions in which the recent Commission deals with vagrants, loafers and others whom the older legislation would describe as "sturdy beggars." On one point only would I venture to take exception to the scheme outlined by the Commissioners. They propose that the "Labour Houses"—by which term they designate what I have called "Labour Reformatories"—should be set up in four of such existing workhouses as would become vacant under their general plan of reform. This implies that the work in which the idlers would be engaged should be such as could be performed in one of those palatial structures in which we lodge the destitute poor. It seems to me that an agricultural settlement, under a rigid system of discipline, would better meet the requirements of the case. Agricultural labour is just the kind for which every one is fitted; it is healthy and invigorating; its effect on moral character is much more wholesome than that of workshop occupations; and, lastly, its products will not enter any market in which competition would be resented.

I come now to that section of the indigent which we find described as the "impotent poor," those whom Mr. Dawson, in his excellent paper, recently read before this Society, denominates "Can't Works," as distinguished from the "Won't Works," with whom we have hitherto been dealing. With these destitution is a mishap and nothing more. It is the consequence of feebleness of body or mind, the incapacity for work which accident or natural causes, beyond the control of the individual affected, have brought about. Here we have the appeal of mere helplessness to our sentiments of humanity, the appeal of a poverty which has in it no element of offence. To this appeal humanity alone must respond. There is no call for justice; if we act at all, kindness, tempered by prudence, is the only virtue we shall find room to exercise. Severity towards mere suffering is wholly out of place. We reprobate the early English legislation, which treated all poverty as a crime, and visited it with savage punishment. But is there not a relic of this inhumanity in our existing Workhouse system, which, after many experiments, has been

adopted as the most suitable to a civilized people? True, the workhouse was instituted as a test of genuine poverty, as a means of distinguishing between the poverty which is voluntary and the poverty which is unavoidable. But the fact that a test is cruel is a proof that it is bad. To distinguish the veracious from the lying among a number of witnesses it is not necessary to put them all upon the rack. Except in our workhouses we do not now employ this means of getting at the truth. The workhouse system was the outcome of a re-action against the demoralizing system of indiscriminate relief which preceded it. But the remedy for one clumsy act of statesmanship is not the perpetration of another, and the statesmanship exhibited in the Act of 1834 is undoubtedly clumsy. So far as the impotent poor are concerned the Act is a negation in fact of the principle on which relief can be claimed or accorded.

The recommendations of the Commission on the point with which we are now dealing are worthy of all praise. They manifest a broader and more intelligent understanding of the problem involved, than does the legislation of 1834. The suggested provisions for the sick poor are, in every respect, admirable. The abolition of the Workhouse Hospital, and the substitution of County and District Institutions, in which the sick can be treated without incurring the stigma of pauperism, is a reform recognised as imperative; and the plan for effecting it outlined in the Report is characterised by humanity and practical good sense. Asylums for the aged and infirm poor, and for destitute and unprotected children, by which the Commissioners propose to replace the existing workhouses, are the only institutions which satisfy the essential purposes of a scheme of public charity. In making their proposals on this head, the Commissioners show a hesitation which would seem to indicate that they have not wholly shaken themselves free of the notions on which our present semi-penal Poor Law system rests. They are in doubt whether it would be well "to make the condition of those who have to be supported by the community as agreeable as that of struggling men and women of independent means." "Personally," they add, "we are in favour of the greatest possible relaxation of irksome rules, in the case of persons of good conduct who had no legal convictions recorded against them, or who had not been obliged to claim support from the poor-rate until compelled by old age or permanent failure of health. On the other hand we see the danger and perhaps unfairness to the struggling, but independent, aged members of the community if any general relaxation of irksome conditions were made."

This paragraph would seem to imply that "irksome conditions," deliberately created, should be attached to the dispensation of relief to the aged and infirm, and this, to pre-

vent their state being as "agreeable" as that of "struggling men and women" in a state of independence. But why, we may ask, should "irksome restrictions" be gratuitously imposed in order to add to the natural hardships of old age and infirmity? Does not this savour of the policy which penalizes poverty? It will not add in any way to the happiness, or diminish the burdens, of persons of independent means that their pensioners are spared some of the miseries under which they groan themselves. And will not their very independence be enough to make their lot preferable to that of those whom they relieve?

Further, the Commissioners offer a suggestion which seems to show that they are not so much impressed by the need of imposing irksome conditions as they profess to be. They write: "as an alternative to providing for aged and infirm applicants for relief in an 'Almshouse,' we recommend that Boards of Guardians should be empowered to board out such persons in institutions that are maintained by religious communities, such as the Little Sisters of the Poor and the Sisters of Nazareth, or by the Trustees of numerous Almshouses that exist in Ireland." If this suggestion is carried into effect there will be no question of "irksome restrictions." From what we know of the institutions referred to, we may assert that there will not be in them any studied effort to aggravate the burden that infirmity and old age bring with them; the single purpose there will be to provide for the inmates every alleviation of their distress that ingenious charity can devise.

On the method of relieving that large class who are destitute, not because they are unable or unwilling to work, but because, though able and willing, they can find no work to do, the Commissioners touch but lightly. To discuss the problem did not come within the terms of their reference, but their views are sufficiently indicated in the opening pages of their Report, in which they criticise the policy which dictated the introduction into Ireland of the English Poor Law with its workhouse accessories, and they manifest a cordial sympathy with the opponents of that policy, who based their resistance on the principle that for the larger number of the Irish poor opportunity for labour, not demoralizing idleness in a workhouse, was the form which relief should take. This opportunity for labour the intelligent Irishmen of the time held it the duty of Government to provide, and with this view the members of the recent Commission are in evident agreement.

It is to be regretted that the limits assigned to their inquiry did not permit them to go fully into the question of State relief for the unemployed. They have given us so much that is excellent on the special issues submitted to them, that on this question, had they considered it, they might have been expected to throw light.

The claims of the unemployed upon the community seem to differ wholly in character from those of the impotent poor. They are urged, it would appear, not as claims of charity, but as claims of justice. The misery of the resourceless poor appeals to our sense of humanity, intensified in Christian society by the teachings of the Gospel; the distress of the unemployed appeals to our sense of natural equity, assuming a certain interpretation of social rights. Poverty in the one case is felt to be a result of the accidents which check human life, and for which human institutions are not responsible, it is "the visitation of God," to use the language of a by-gone age; in the other it is resented as a wrong, is instinctively attributed to some defect in the social economy for which society is responsible, and which society is bound to remedy. Let us inquire into the possible reasons for this difference of mental attitude in those who share a common distress. We deal only with the case in which want of employment is widespread—as in Ireland in 1838. Casual and accidental phenomena of the kind may be dismissed as due to casual and accidental causes.

Want of employment on a large scale implies that a large portion of the labour force of the country is precluded from access to the natural materials of wealth-production. Speaking in general terms, the only remedy for this evil is the removal of the interposed obstacles, whatever they may be. Now, the agents of wealth-production, other than labour, are land and capital. Want of employment, therefore, implies that labour is divorced from the land of the country, or from its capital, or from both. Let us begin with the land.

Land is the gift of nature to the community settled upon it; it is the primary source from which they are to draw their subsistence by labour. It follows that every individual having a right to existence in the community has a right to draw for himself the means of subsistence from this source, so far as he is not otherwise provided for. This does not mean that every individual must be a landowner, or that all land must be public property. But it means that no system of landownership which excludes a large part of the labour of the nation from the use of the soil—in circumstances where the soil is the only available source of subsistence—is consistent with natural right. It is the duty of Government to harmonise the rights of individuals within the State, and in relation to the State. In the case before us it becomes the duty of Government so to determine and define the rights of property in land that no section of the people for whom land is the only resource shall be debarred from the use of it. I am speaking, of course, of that condition of things in which population is not so overgrown that the land of the nation is not sufficient for its needs.

The principle I here lay down justifies the land legislation

which modifies and restricts the rights of landowners in the manner with which we are familiar in Ireland. The same principle, would justify the State in taking land into its own hands—due compensation being made to the owners—and employing it for the establishment of Labour Colonies, for public works, or for otherwise meeting the needs of unemployed labour. In Ireland there is ample field for this kind of Government action. There is an abundance of waste land to be reclaimed, of slob-land to be enclosed, of bog and mountain land to be planted—all giving opportunities for undertakings which, if judiciously carried out, would not only furnish subsistence to labourers out of employment, but would add distinctly to the volume of our national wealth. It is not suggested that the undertakings here indicated would be most effectually carried out under direct State management. But, as a means of dealing with the problem of the unemployed, they are ready to hand, and it would not require any great effort of administrative skill to organise them for this purpose. To one feature only of such a scheme is it necessary to call attention. As a measure of relief, it should be availed of only as a temporary resource. It should not be so planned, that the individuals whom it relieved would find it more acceptable than, or as acceptable as, the opportunities of independent labour. An inducement should be offered them to dispense with State aid as quickly as possible, and to provide this inducement the rate of wages in the relief system should not be on a level with that of labour not so aided. This implies that the products of State-aided undertakings should not compete in the market with those of independent labour; but from undertakings such as I have indicated no competition could arise.

I come now to the third of the three factors of wealth-production, which I have enumerated above—Capital. In all advanced communities capital must co-operate with labour to produce wealth; the degree in which capital is prominent in production is, according to a distinguished German economist, the measure of industrial and economic progress.

But capital, unlike land, is not a gift of nature. It is a creation of human effort, and, as such, becomes property in a stricter sense than can be the case with land. It is, therefore, more completely under the control of the owner than the soil can be; as suits his interests, he can withdraw it from investment or temporarily suspend its use. When this occurs, want of employment on a large scale may follow. In such case what are the measures open to Government for the relief of the unemployed? I put aside the answer which Socialism furnishes to this question—that Government should make itself the owner of all capital, and thus be in a



position to secure its steady co-operation with labour. For that summary solution of the problem the world is not prepared, and most calmly thinking men are of opinion that this solution would not be a solution at all; that an attempt to apply it would only aggravate the evils for which it is proposed as a remedy.

Shall we seek our way out of the difficulty in a system of insurance imposed by law, under which fat years of industry shall be made to lay up a store to alleviate the dearth of the lean? Compulsory insurance has been tried as a provision against sickness, accident, and old age, might it not also be employed as a provision against the accidents which bring about want of employment?

To these questions I cannot offer an assured answer. The insurance system which has been imposed in Germany has not given results which would encourage imitation, much less suggest the extension of the scheme on the scale required to provide against want of employment. Government interference with the freedom of capital is a hazardous policy. But the problem of the unemployed grows in magnitude and urgency in the centres where capital is concentrated. The statesmen of England will be obliged to confront it, unless they are prepared to leave it to the Socialists, whose influence will increase the longer it is neglected.

With us in Ireland want of employment, except in a few large towns, is connected rather with the use of land than with the use of capital, and with us, therefore, the path of Government in dealing with this grave question is both more easy and more obvious.