

THE MEANING OF LIFE

Sermon by Rev. Herbert S. Bigelow, Having for a Text Henry George's "Progress and Poverty"

(Reported for The Independent by Daniel Kiefer of the Ohio Single Tax League.)

"What then is the meaning of life—of life absolutely and inevitably bounded by death? To me it seems intelligibly only as the avenue and vestibule of another life."

These words from the closing chapter of "Progress and Poverty" were discussed Sunday evening by Herbert



HERBERT S. BIGELOW.

S. Bigelow, pastor of the Vine Street Congregational church, Cincinnati, in a sermon on the Meaning of Life.

"As an original thinker in the field of political economy, Henry George is well known," said Mr. Bigelow. "But the service he has rendered in quickening the springs of religious life is not so widely appreciated.

"What led to the writing of "Progress and Poverty" is told by the author as follows:

"When I first realized the squalid misery of a great city, it appalled and tormented me, and would not let me rest, for thinking of what caused it and how it could be cured.

"To find the cause and cure of this social disease of poverty Henry George re-wrote the Science of Political Economy. Instead of the dismal and despairing science Political Economy had been, it became, under his treatment, 'radiant with hope!'

"In the beginning the author had intended to confine his discussion to political economy. But the principle which stood out in that discussion led him, inevitably, into another field of thought, and beginning with an inquiry into the causes of poverty, he concluded with a declaration of faith in the immortality of the soul.

"Out of this inquiry," he said, "has come to me something I did not think to find, and a faith that was dead revives."

"Thousands of thoughtful and earnest men have had the same experience. They have begun by embracing the teachings of Henry George on the subject of political economy. They have ended by finding a new religious philosophy, and the 'faith that was dead revives.'

"Near the close of Henry George's life a young man called upon him whose whole career had been changed by this book, "Progress and Poverty." The young man told Mr. George his religious experience, which is by no means exceptional. He had been born in the faith of the mother church. He had had a long and futile struggle to suppress his questionings and remain in the church. At last he left it. Then he drifted like a ship with broken rudder. He saw much of poverty and suffering. He heard the preachers apologize for the degradation and slavery of their fellows. Some said there were too many people in the world, and they looked with favor upon war and pestilence as a means of reducing the surplus population. Others declared there was not wealth enough to go round. Others stoutly maintained that we must always have the poor with us and that of human woe there could be no end on earth. The young man demanded why these things should be so in a world made by the good God. He got no answer to his question. Sometimes they laughed at him. Sometimes they frowned on him. But answer him they could not. Then he came to the conclusion that this must be the devil's world.

"He lost all faith in God. He became an unbeliever, even a scorner. His heart became a sun-scorched desert. There were no springs of faith.

There were no places green and fresh with hope. There was no truth which seemed to him beautiful; no cause which seemed to him holy; no sign that there was anywhere in the blind universe a God who cared.

"At last a copy of "Progress and Poverty" fell into his hands. He had heard that the book was dry reading. For him it read like a romance, because he went to it, not for entertainment, but with a consuming desire to find a solution for the dark problem of poverty. In the mind of the author he saw this blind universe reduced to order. He saw human wretchedness and wrong traced to their final causes, not in the mistakes of the creator, but in the ignorance of the creature. He saw that creation was not a colossal blunder. His soul was stirred by the mighty thought of this book, which unfolded and revealed to him the possibility of a human society living in conformity with the laws of nature and rewarded for its obedience with abundance and peace.

"The faith that was dead revived. This book had saved him from unbelief and pointed the way back to a larger and a happier and more rational faith than he had ever known.

"When the young man had finished his story, Mr. George replied that the sweetest reward he could have was in such evidence that his teachings had inspired his fellows with a vital faith in God and a new hope for man. Then, putting his hand on the young man's arm, he added:

"My work is done. I have searched and found law in its sovereign beauty, even where men said there was no law. If the soul dies there is a break in nature's laws. That I cannot believe. These laws must hold their sway even where we cannot see. We cannot tell where or how, but we have seen enough to establish our faith in the universality of natural law, therefore we must believe in the future life of the soul."

"The meaning of Henry George may be made clear by the following illustration. A famous astronomer discovered a certain law governing heavenly bodies. According to this law, there should have been, at a given place in the heavens, a star. But men could see no star there, and some argued from the absence of the star that the astronomer was in error. The astronomer insisted that if men could not find the star it was the fault of their eyesight and not the fault of this law.

"At last, a wonderful lens was invented, and behold, the star was found, where the astronomer had declared it ought to be. You see, the astronomer had traced the law part way. He knew it must hold good all the way. When others doubted, he saw that star. He saw it with the eye of faith, a faith that was based upon a knowledge of law.

"So it is with the life of the soul. The philosopher sees that the laws of nature, when rightly understood, point to the happiness and development of the human soul, as the goal of creation. If the soul dies then life is an infinite series of failures. This he cannot believe. He insists that the laws must hold good all the way. No lens has been discovered powerful enough to sight the shores of that distant life, but it is the faith of the philosopher, based upon a study of nature's laws, that in due time stars of glory yet unseen will be revealed to man.

"Meanwhile we adopt the faith which offers us the only rational explanation of the universe, namely, that life is a school-house for immortal souls."

CRITIQUES OF SINGLE TAX

The Independent of June 11 will devote part of its space to criticisms of the single tax as presented in this issue. Articles must be to the point and not too long. I would suggest that Mr. Post's argument be made the objective point of attack. It will be the fortress most difficult to capture. Is it true that taxation according to benefits conferred is alone ethically justifiable? Is it true that taxation according to ability to pay is legalized robbery? Is it true that individual man produces any but the simplest things unaided by his fellows?

Even as to these, is it true that the individual's right of property in his product is always indefeasible?

In the light of the past ten years of trust-building, who is right—Mr. Post or the socialists? The latter contend that competition carries within itself the seeds of its own death; Mr. Post avers that like begets like and that monopoly has grown because the seed—land monopoly—has grown and is bearing fruit.

Waiving technical controversy, is the single tax expedient? Will the rules for applying it to farms and town lots, serve in applying it to railroad rights of way?—De France.

Politico-Economic Thoughts

(Written for Henry George Edition of The Independent.)

As a suggestion to start with I would call attention of all readers of this issue to the necessity of retaining possession of it until they receive the issue of early June, which will be devoted to criticisms of the single tax, if they would be in a position to properly judge of the merits of the George ideas and weigh the objections to them for what they are worth. Those who criticize the single tax are prone to misrepresent it, ignorantly or otherwise, and absurd notions are advanced in order to combat it, which only confuse and mislead those who are not in position to detect the errors that are put forth as logic and fact. By retaining their copies of this issue they can compare the arguments pro and con and arrive at something akin to reasonable and logical conclusions as to the truth or falsity of our contentions.

WHAT IS VALUE?

A definition and an argument. Henry George wrote at greater length on the word "value" than any other term in all of his great works, thus giving the impression that this term is of more importance in political economy than any other. I believe this to be true, and have given a great deal of study to the finding of an accurate definition for it. After eight attempts, consisting of a somewhat long drawn out dissertation on the meaning of the word and subsequent revisions and eliminations, I completed the definition to my own satisfaction more than a year ago and now submit it for the first time. I have never seen anything even bordering on this treatment of the term, and if I have not erred, I think I have helped to unravel a knotty point in our philosophy. The following is the definition:

"Value" is an intangible something that bears an absolute relationship to man and applies to the things which serve to satisfy his wants. It exists because he exists and is a natural factor that can neither be seen, felt or heard. It is made manifest only by the action of the mind in fixing price and the action of mind in price-fixing results from the natural law which impels man to seek satisfaction of his desires by the least expenditure of mental or physical exertion.

This law, if I am not mistaken, was first given to the world of letters by Henry George in "Progress and Poverty."

"Price" is an auxiliary word to "value," and denotes action of the individual mind in the manifestations of value, but price is not controlled by value, and the two words do not stand for the same thing. Value is co-existent with population, while price signifies the worth of things ACCORDING TO THE NOTIONS OF THE INDIVIDUAL. Value is not fixed by mind-action. Man's desire to live without exertion accounts for it, and it exists where he exists, and varies only as conditions of his environment varies. If he lives in a frozen region like the Klondike, those things which sustain life will naturally have for him a value commensurately higher than if he were in a country of prolific fertility, but the higher value is in reality only a comparison as between the life-sustaining products and the money or gold dust he may have to exchange for them and is arrived at intuitively, or without conscious mental effort. The value of those things which are not capable of sustaining life really falls and reaches a level commensurately with the probable deficiency in the supply of food products. If the latter should fall so low as to threaten the life of some, those who must find a seller or perish, will give their all for a morsel, or commit murder for it, but this does not signify that the morsel would be possessed of any great amount of real value, but it would signify an extraordinary price.

Value having a vital relationship to man's bodily wants, it appears plausible that those things having peculiar life-sustaining qualities, and the supply of which is normal as compared to the number drawing therefrom, have the greatest amount of true value for man, and that the value of everything else either falls or rises as compared to this standard, the value of money being no exception, and, as a side remark, the value of money is in its usefulness and not in the material of which it is composed, for, so long as it is money it has no value as anything else and can only be made valuable as anything else by the destruction of its money functions.

Taxation has no effect on value, but it has a very decided effect on price-fixing. On the products of labor it enables the seller to increase the price at which he will agree to sell, and force the buyer to pay the price, particularly if the product is a neces-

sity of life. In India salt is taxed three thousand per cent and salt is so dear that the millions of poor suffer terribly because of their inability to buy enough for their daily needs.

Any kind of taxation on those things produced by the labor of man, whether direct or indirect; whether of the tariff variety or internal revenue, simply increases the price to the consumer. Not so, however, in the case of taxation of land (the sources of labor products) according to its site value.

To illustrate: a lot in a great city is valued at several thousand dollars a front foot while a few dollars per acre, in the country, will buy a large body of land. Land value taxation would be levied accordingly, and instead of enabling the owner to ask an increased price for land he would be impelled to seek a buyer at a decreased price, if he wanted to dispose of it, for, if the tax should be heavy enough to take from him any considerable proportion of the percentage of the prevailing average interest rate, those holding vacant, unused lands for speculative purposes would immediately put their property on sale at reduced prices and this would affect the power of price-fixing on all landed property for sale, and if the tax rate should be increased to approximately the full interest rate, all unused lands would become in a short time absolutely free of all price-fixing and any one could enter upon them and secure a home site at an annual tax rate amounting to a nominal sum as compared to the rental charges made by the private owners today, who not only charge for the use of the ground the full average interest rate, but compel tenants to pay all taxes in addition.

To conclude, the taxation of land values does not affect the values to their destruction as many single taxers contend, but it does affect the power of price-fixing upon land, BECAUSE IT TRANSFERS THIS POWER TO THOSE HAVING THE POWER TO LEVY AND COLLECT THE TAX.

If, after a body of land should be surrendered and come into possession of the taxing power it could be disposed of at a price by the simple process of lowering or eliminating the tax upon it, therefore, the taxation of labor products operates to increase the power of the private individual to charge more or make a higher price on things he may have for sale, while the taxation of land values operates to decrease the power or entirely eliminate it in the hands of the private individual, and to shift it to the power levying the tax. L. P. CUSTER. St. Louis, Mo.

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