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Justice and Morality

by OSCAR B. JOHANNSEN

WHENEVER a suggestion is made for improving social conditions the first question raised will usually be "Is it right?" rather than "Is it wise?" Georgists invariably are forced to defend the justice of their proposals rather than the wisdom of them. To be effective, therefore, a fairly clear understanding of what is involved in such abstract concepts as rights, justice and morality, is imperative.

It is wise to start with basic facts and assumptions. What is the most basic fact affecting man? Obviously life itself. A man has a claim or right to life, for as a sentient being he possesses this mysterious principle — and as this principle is the same for everyone, all men have an equal claim or equal right to life. If articles of wealth produced by man are involved (property), all men have an equal claim or right to own them, for all have an equal necessity for material goods.

These claims to life and property arose out of man's nature. Because of that, rights are often referred to as natural rights. A right is a claim to something which arises out of man's nature and which applies equally to all. Almost instinctively men feel such rights are proper or just, and thus they tend to apply the term justice to such claims. Justice becomes the standard by which specific actions are judged.

While the term moral is often used interchangeably with just, it seems one should distinguish between the two and probably, quite unconsciously, most people do. The distinction is that justice is concerned with standards which arise out of the nature of men, whereas morality deals with standards arising out of experience or customs.

An individual has a right to own property, for unless he can feed and clothe himself he dies. Therefore this is a just claim. It is a right. On the other hand, in a monogamous society, bigamy is immoral because it does not accord with that society's marital standards. There is no question of whether it is just or unjust as there is no natural necessity requiring a man to have only one wife. There have been other societies which have practiced polygamy or polyandry and for them bigamy is moral.

Not to make a distinction between morality and justice can, and has, led to justice being dismissed as something which merely depends on the particular customs which a society evolves, and socialists have used this argument often with telling effect.

But rights are always the same in every society, and until man's nature changes justice will always be the same. Murder is always wrong for it

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denies a man his right to life. Theft is always wrong for indirectly it denies man's right to life since, as pointed out, without some property he cannot live. Slavery is always wrong for it denies to man the right not only to the freedom he requires to produce the necessities to maintain his life, but the very property which his labor produces. Private ownership of land is always wrong for implicitly it denies to man his right of access to the earth—this is necessary if he is to obtain the wealth required to maintain life.

What is moral in one society then, is not necessarily moral in another, as with the case cited. Manners probably constitute the highest and subtlest form of morality, and while good manners should be cultivated, if they are not, no injustice is implied. Their absence simply violates a custom which men have evolved to aid them in cooperating with one another. It is good manners to listen to your friend without interrupting him. Most people would say this is being polite for politeness' sake—but actually it facilitates communication between you and your friend.

Henry Hazlitt discusses ethics in his excellent work, *The Foundation of Morality*. While he does not make the distinction between justice and morality, he does emphasize the importance of following general rules and of acting on principle. While to him justice consists in observance of the rules and principles that do most to preserve and promote social cooperation, he accepts Jeremy Bentham's conclusion that morality is the code of laws leading to conduct which will give the greatest felicity to all.

It is often assumed that justice and morality are ends in themselves which transcend happiness, and we are sometimes exhorted to sacrifice happiness for justice or morality. This creates a confusion of means with ends. Because a human being is possessed of deep philosophic and spiritual feelings, justice and morality have psychic values for him which cannot be ignored. But the principal reason for the practice of these concepts is that it enables members of a society to cooperate with one another to their mutual advantage.

We know that honesty is best, for it accords with our moral standard. This knowledge arose from thousands of years of experience and millions of human contacts. People found that honesty afforded certain advantages such as facilitating the efficient purchase and sale of goods, but they also found that their day by day relations with others were agreeably enhanced. In other words, a reputation for honesty was a distinct advantage. Even thieves find it wise to be honest with each other when dividing their loot, for experience has taught them that dissensions which arise when they try to cheat often result in their being apprehended.

When the question is raised as to why the community should collect the economic rent of land, the answer is that it is just, for it is the most efficient means known for men to allocate among themselves the land which all require for their existence. The importance of this principle lies in the fact that it enables each individual to utilize his capacities to the maximum to attain the end beyond which there is no end, and which Aristotle said is the one all men strive for—happiness.

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The search for truth is, as it always has been, the noblest expression of the human spirit. Man's environment and the forces by which he is surrounded, gives life its meaning and purpose, and clothes it with final dignity . . . And yet we know, deep in our hearts, that knowledge is not enough . . . Unless we can anchor our knowledge to moral purposes, the ultimate result will be dust and ashes.

—Raymond B. Fosdick