

Sir Issac Newton and Henry George

Two Apostles of Natural Law

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JUST as Sir Isaac Newton's law of gravitation restrains the centrifugal inertia of otherwise freely moving moons and planets, producing orderly solar systems in the universe; so Henry George's law of human progress, a statement of moral law, limits the freedom of individuals in the gratification of their desires, and thus points the path to higher and higher civilizations.

Newton wanted to know why the moon revolves around the earth, and why the planets revolve around the sun. They say the fall of an apple suggested the solution. The first law of motion demands that a body in motion shall continue moving in a straight line with a uniform velocity unless acted upon by an external force. Newton's contribution was the statement of his law of gravitation.

In the field of social science, Henry George also deals with two natural laws. His first law is stated in the Introduction of *Progress and Poverty*, "Men seek to gratify their desires with the least exertion." As stated, this law puts no limitation to the freedom of the individual. He may want anything he pleases, and satisfy that want in any way he can. If stealing is the easiest way, this law does not forbid stealing, but to put this law in the form of the first law of motion we add the phrase, *unless restrained by moral law*. George's second law imposes this restraint.

The argument in *Progress and Poverty* leads straight to Book X, the title of which is "The Law of Human Progress." George's statement of this law is "Association in Equality," and he calls it "the recognition of moral law." George's first law deals only with the individual; but his second law brings in society (individuals in association with each other)—it also gives equality, equal rights and equal opportunity, as the ethical relation that should hold between individuals. We find here decided limitations to the freedom of the individual, for among the moral laws universally recognized is the commandment, thou shalt not steal. His freedom is limited by the equal freedom of his fellow men.

George's recognition of the importance of society as a factor in human progress may be gathered from the following quotations from the last pages of Book X, Chapter II of *Progress and Poverty*.

"Each society, small or great, necessarily weaves for itself a web of knowledge, beliefs, customs, languages, tastes, institutions, and laws. Into this web, woven by each society, . . . the individual is received at birth and continues until his death."

Then, referring to the web, George continues, "Though it is this that often offers the most serious obstacles to progress, it is this that makes progress possible. It is this that enables any schoolboy in our time to learn in a few hours more of the universe than Ptolmey knew; that places the most humdrum scientist far above the level reached by the giant mind of Aristotle. This is to the race what memory is to the individual. Our wonderful arts, our far-reaching science, our marvelous inventions—they have come through this.

"Human progress goes on as the advances made by one generation are in this way secured

as the common property of the next, and made the starting point for new advances. . . ."

Turn where we may, we shall find that progress has always been evolutionary. Man lived through the Stone Age, the Bronze Age, and the Iron Age; men have lived in caves, tents, log huts, frame and brick houses, and in tall apartment buildings. Having worked with his hands, used windmills, waterwheels, steam engines, and internal-combustion engines, man is now splitting the atom. We find like evolutionary processes going on in horticulture, animal husbandry, medicine, transportation, every branch of industry, every science and every art. In these evolutionary developments, what part has the individual played? What part has society played?

Let us use our imagination and picture what must have happened in the centuries between the Stone Age and the Iron Age. Sometimes primitive men found black stones in the ashes of their fires, stones not there before the fire was built, stones they found nowhere else, stones they kept as charms, stones they talked about. Finally it was noticed that they never got the black stones in the ashes unless certain other stones had been in the fire, and that the other stones had disappeared. At last someone decided to make the black stone in quantity. He put the right stones in the fire and had the first crude furnace for the reduction of iron ore to metallic iron.

Then, and not until then, was the stage set for Vulcan, Hephaestus and Tubal Cain, for until blacksmiths have iron, they cannot do their work. Had these geniuses been born earlier, they could not have worked in iron, but they were the kind of men who would have experimented and found from what stones iron could be produced. Were they living today, they would probably be working with jet planes or atomic bombs.

This division of labor between society and the individual will also appear if we compare the civilization of the American Indian with that of the colonists. I boldly assert that the main cause for the difference is the heritage the colonists had, due to the fact their past included over twenty centuries of a written as well as an oral language. The Indians had but two ways of transmitting the accumulated experience of their race from generation to generation, the habits the tribe acquired (their folkways), and the none-too-reliable memory of the living. But the colonists had a mechanical memory, a phonetic alphabet, twenty-six black marks on white paper, by which they could preserve word for word the thoughts of men long since dead.

In the physical and biological sciences we get the past on which to build the future by assuming that the universe is orderly, governed by natural laws. Our objective then becomes to learn these laws and apply them. We do this by cutting and trying, and thus we gradually approach accuracy in stating a natural law. Probably the first statement of the law of gravitation was, things fall to the earth. But balloons go up, the moon goes around the earth, and the planets go around the sun. Finally Newton stated the law in a form that accounts for all of these phenomena. There has been an evolution

in our knowledge of the natural laws of physics, chemistry, botany and zoology, and evolution dating back to the infancy of the race.

Let us look at some of the changes that have taken place in the domains of civics, politics and ethics, and let us watch for trends. What pronounced changes have there been in folkways? All that is left of the widespread folkway of human sacrifice to appease the gods is the altar in our churches, on which today no animal is ever killed, no fire ever kindled. Many an Agamemnon had sacrificed his Iphigenia, but later many an Abraham had the courage to refuse compliance, and the bad folkway died a slow death. Chattel slavery is also on the way out. So far as legislation can end it, it does not exist in the civilized world; but our last presidential election shows that the old slavery folkway is far from dead, for it is putting up a vigorous resistance to our Bill of Rights, to the fundamental law of the land. We face a conflict between folkways, between the dying folkways of slavery and the growing folkway prophesied by our Bill of Rights. Folkways change slowly; but the trend here is toward equality and freedom.

This trend toward equality and freedom may also be found in the evolution of government; and every government today is the present stage of an evolution still in progress. What does history tell of the changes? The father was the natural head of the family, and patriarchs like Abraham and Lot ruled larger family groups. This centralization of power into the hands of a single individual continued in the chiefs of tribes, many of which wandered west from central Asia, bringing with them our Indo-European languages. We had robber barons and Robin Hoods; we had Genghis Khans and Attilas. Now and then we had a great law-giver, a Hammurabi, a Solon, the Gracchi. In every case these prophets of the political future relieved the pressure on the people, and usually gave some of the people a voice in affairs. The trend was toward equality and freedom.

It is true that there have been recessions, that civilizations have passed out; but the better part of civilization has always remained. Men have never gone back to the Stone Age, nor to the Bronze Age. The ancients may have had some secret processes we do not know today. Some talk of the Toledo blade; but no previous civil-

ization had either the metallurgy or the science of today. Nor did any people, under any government of the past, have either the equality or the freedom enjoyed by the great mass of English-speaking people today.

The analogy between Newton's law of gravitation and George's law of human progress is remarkably close. Both dealt with two laws that had opposing tendencies, and both limited the operation of one law by the other. Both avoided opposing catastrophies, and both secured order. One of Newton's laws was centrifugal, the other centripetal, in its tendency. Had the first prevailed, the moons and the planets would have gone off into infinite space, never to return. Had the second prevailed, they would all have fallen into the sun, and formed one great molten mass. But as both laws are acting all the time, neither calamity has happened. Instead every moon and every planet is going its own way in its own orbit, and we have an orderly solar system in an orderly universe.

Henry George also dealt with two opposing forces, the demands of the individual and the demands of society. Had the first prevailed, individuals would be flying off on the tangents of anarchy. Had the second prevailed, all would be merged in the one-togetherness of socialism. But both forces have been constantly in action, and we are living in a social evolution that has already advanced far, and whose tendency is toward greater equality and greater freedom.