

Ascent to the Good through Justice

Henry George: The Ascent to the Good through Justice

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It seems an extraordinary thing that our age still fails to grasp that human society is a natural and lawful part of the earth and the living world, that it has a nature of its own that requires a special mode of understanding to be discerned. Yet this is what Henry George continuously strives to demonstrate, and in this respect he belongs to a long tradition extending back to the Old Testament prophets, the Greek philosophers, the Roman Stoics, and the Medieval Christian scholastics. One might include the ancient Chinese philosophers and the Indian sages. All draw attention to the lawfulness of Nature and to the natural laws of human society, and all say that society declines and perishes if it neglects the lawfulness of its own nature.

I do not think it is only the great prophets, philosophers and theologians who know this. I believe every human being intuitively knows that there is an underlying providential order to human society and the possibility of it being nurtured to perfection, so that Paradise on earth may be realised. In particular I believe that young people as they step from childhood to maturity have a direct sense of an ideal order, a perfection in which goodness and truth and beauty might shine in every facet of human life and activity. And it is that intuition that draws many to the various professions and vocations that seek to improve the human situation, or to at least reduce poverty and suffering.

The great challenge lies in finding a path from that ancient wisdom, this innate intuition that all have, and transforming human society. It is here that Henry George has made the greatest contribution, because he shows us not only the lawfulness of the economic factors and principles, but also how coming to a knowledge of the nature of human society and civilisation brings about transformation of itself. When thought conforms itself to the truth of Nature, society is spontaneously transformed. As George says 'Until there be correct thought, there cannot be right action; and when there is correct thought, right action will follow' (*Social Problems*, Ch. 21). This means that there is a correlation between the integrity of human understanding and the condition of society or civilisation, between the human mind and the material conditions we create. Henry George is perfectly clear about this in *Social Problems* where he writes:

The domain of law is not confined to physical nature. It just as certainly embraces the mental and moral universe, and social growth and social life have their laws as fixed as those of matter and of motion. Would we make social life healthy and happy, we must discover those laws, and seek our ends in accordance with them.¹ (*Social Problems*, Ch. 21)

For Plato or Aristotle this assertion about the mental and moral universe being a part of the domain of law would have been no surprise. But in George's time it is a radical departure from the established doctrine which holds that human society is an artificial condition imposed upon the state of Nature, and that far from the moral realm being part of the natural order of Nature, it is imposed upon human nature from outside itself, and that the natural human condition was that of selfish desire and conflict. Thus human law is considered to be a necessary imposition of the state upon the person in order to curb the innate savage desires. For Thomas Hobbes, writing in the 17th century, the quest for peace and social order involved the individual giving up their natural right to all power and unlimited possession – the state of nature. Society amounts to little more than a pragmatic compromise for self-preservation. Thus self-preservation of the individual is taken to be the primary driving force of Nature, with every creature competing with every other.² With few exceptions, this is the view of all the natural law theorists of the Enlightenment. It is precisely the opposite view of Aristotle and Aquinas and the natural law tradition prior to the Enlightenment.

This separation of the material and the moral realms remains a major obstacle in understanding the ancient tradition of Natural Law, especially since for the ancients the moral and mental realms have causal precedence over the material realm. Perhaps the most significant consequence of this separation and reversal of the natural order shows itself most sharply in the incompatibility between Justice and the Good. If justice is reduced to the morally indifferent striving of Nature for self-preservation, in which each being is at war with every other, and might is equal to right, then the meaning of the Good as understood by the Greek philosophers and by Christian tradition is entirely divorced from the natural order. Prior to the 17th century the Good was understood to be the final end towards which the whole of Nature was orientated. It was the informing principle of universal order and harmony. The principle that mediated the Good was Justice, so that through Justice all things may come to their perfection in the Good.

But that understanding of the relationship between Justice and the Good has been lost in Western thought, and as a consequence many of the ills we see about us are tackled through remedies that seem good and worthy, but which

¹ The edition used in this paper is Henry George, *Social Problems*, Henry George Foundation of Great Britain, 1931.

² J. B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy*, p. 90.

essentially pass over the question of justice. For example, at this time we are confronted with environmental destruction on a large scale, and while many seek to rectify it, few see it is a direct consequence of injustice within society itself. But this injustice within society is not even seen as “unlawful”, as contrary to the universal order that runs through all things. Is it not extraordinary that human poverty is not seen as unlawful, but merely as unfortunate? Consequently, if society lives contrary to its own nature, it must follow that it lives contrary to Nature as a whole. So the question of the nature of Justice and its relation to the Good is an essential question if mankind is to understand its own nature, and place within Nature.

George was clearly aware of this distinction, and of the necessity to understand Justice as a precondition to understanding the ultimate Good. There is a passage in his *Social Problems* where he remarks upon the possibility of Christian communities who live together in complete charity and love, in a state he calls “sanctification”, “in which the dream of pristine innocence should become the reality, and man, so to speak, should again walk with God” (p. 73). Such a state, he says, can only be a speculation for society in which Justice is not first understood and established. Thus he writes:

That justice is the highest quality in the moral hierarchy I do not say; but that it is the first. That which is above justice must be based on justice, and include justice, and be reached through justice. It is not by accident that, in the Hebraic religious development which through Christianity we have inherited, the declaration, “The Lord thy God is a just God,” precedes the sweeter revelation of a God of Love. Until the eternal justice is perceived, the eternal love must be hidden. As the individual must be just before he can be truly generous, so must human society be based upon justice before it can be based on benevolence.³

He goes on to say;

This, and this alone, I contend for – that our social institutions be conformed to justice; to those natural and eternal principles of right that are so obvious that no one can deny or dispute them – so obvious that by a law of human mind even those who try to defend social injustice must invoke them.⁴

George is here calling upon the spirit of Natural Law as once embodied in the principles of Roman jurisprudence, the insight that Justice runs through all Nature, including human society, and that its principles are self-evident and eternal. There is a correspondence between the order of Nature and the rational

³ *Social Problems*, p. 74

⁴ *Social Problems*, p. 74

intelligence of the human mind. In this regard George is discounting, without explicitly saying so, a great part of the modern Natural Law theory inaugurated by Grotius (1583 – 1645) and developed by Hobbes, Locke and John Stuart Mill. For these thinkers there are no “eternal principles of right” manifest in the nature of things and in society. For them Justice is a human construct pragmatically agreed upon or imposed upon society through an act of the ruler’s will. Thus law in general became for them located in the will rather than the reason. The laws of nature were simply the brute facts of the material realm, the Newtonian world-view, measurable through mathematics, while the laws of society lay above the natural order, and rather than being integral to society, were imposed upon it by an external will. So the concept of “law” becomes understood in terms of power and authority and force, or what is technically called “voluntarism”, and so likewise does the rise of the secular state. This voluntaristic conception of law remains so even today in our Western democracies.

So when George asks that our social institutions be conformed to justice, he is asking that they be aligned with the universal order of Nature, and with the intelligible reason that runs through all Nature. But this can be possible only if the principles of Justice are perceived and articulated. It is at this point that we run into difficulties, and are compelled to ask why it is that self-evident Justice remains generally inaccessible to the modern mind or culture.

We can trace a number of major reasons for this difficulty, some of which I have touched upon in my previous talks, but here I would like to focus on one which Henry George is concerned with in the passage we just quoted; the distinction he draws between benevolence and justice. George says “Until the eternal justice is perceived, the eternal love must be hidden”. In that simple sentence I believe that George has hit upon an essential truth about the nature of society and the law of human progress.

In the light of this principle George goes on to praise all the works of philanthropy he sees in the world, yet he says that without the establishment of justice such works attain little. Good will and generosity are not enough, not even if done in the name of Christian charity. Why should this be so? First of all, and most obviously, because such works do not discover and remove the causes of poverty and injustice. They may bring relief and mitigate the effects of injustice, as many of our democracies strive to do, but if the causes remain, so the effects will keep recurring. Yet it is precisely because the democracies keep trying to mitigate the effects of injustice that the causes are never brought to light. But also, there is the strongly held notion that poverty and inequality are simply part of how the world is, or even that God has disposed things this way for his own hidden reasons. This idea comes from the Lutheran doctrine that our worldly conditions are ultimately of no account, and that rich and poor alike should direct all their attention to

salvation and the next life. From this inauspicious doctrine comes the equally abysmal idea of the “Protestant ethic”, which holds that in this world one simply does one’s external duties from obedience, and not for the common good, since it is only the next life that matters, which is secured through faith alone and not through works. What began as a protest against the excessive authority of the Church and the quest for the liberty of the individual soon declined into a form of fatalism.

It is perhaps to the good that this fatalistic and utterly unchristian attitude towards the world is fading away, and that it is challenged by the present conditions that demand collective response.

There is, however, a tendency in our age to rush to change the manifest effects of wrong actions or wrong policies without seriously considering the root causes. This tendency is evident in modern medicine, technology, industrial farming, environmentalism, economic policy, health and safety, education policy and so on. Good results are sought in all these realms, but the real nature of each realm is ignored.

The will to force results without due regard for the natural order ends either in failure or producing harmful results, or in George’s terms, leaves the underlying causes unseen and untouched. Without the knowledge of Justice the will to the good has no proper centre or direction. Thus George says, “Until the eternal justice is perceived, the eternal love must be hidden”.

I would like to draw some implications from this statement. The first is that the lawful passage to the Good is through Justice. If this passage is lawful, and therefore cannot be lawfully circumvented, then it shows us that the first step towards Justice is a conformation of the intelligence to the nature of things. This conformation involves a submission of the will to the truth of things, rather than any kind of exertion over things. It is what Plato and Aristotle understand by prudence, meaning right perception. In terms of society, this conformation of the mind to the nature of things determines the political nature of man – man as the being who discerns and enacts the law. For the ancient philosophers this virtue of prudence is the prerequisite for the virtue of justice.

A second implication follows from this. In conforming the intelligence to the nature of things, the human mind acts according to its own nature. Thus there is a direct correlation between the truth of things and the nature of mind as such. George speaks of this when he says there is a “law of the human mind” which compels even those who defend injustice to invoke the name of justice.

From this follows what to me is a most important third implication. This discernment of the natural order of things, or their lawfulness, is a communicable form of knowledge. It may be articulated and exchanged, and it may be confirmed through observation. The whole of Henry George's writings attest to this. The knowledge of Natural Law, and therefore of justice, is the one form of knowledge that belongs to every human being by nature. According to Aristotle, it is the mode of knowledge that makes us human. It is therefore the form of knowledge that founds society and community – it belongs to the essence of society, it is the seed from which society springs.

If this is so – and Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas each affirm it in different ways – then it must follow that whatever conditions of human society prevail at any time must be a reflection of the quality of that understanding. If there is physical poverty amidst great wealth, then this must arise from intellectual poverty. This correlation between the quality of human understanding and the material social conditions seems to me to be completely lawful, and indeed a major key to the sphere of Natural Law. To put that more formally, there is a lawful correspondence between the collective degree of understanding society and its prevailing state or condition. To the degree that justice is understood, to that degree it prevails.

From these reflections it becomes evident that there is a direct relationship between human intelligence and Nature as a whole, and that this relationship has an ethical dimension corresponding with its rational dimension, and that the two cannot really be separated. In the *Laws* Plato asks how the best laws may be discerned in the founding of a city state, and he insists repeatedly that the only way in which good laws could be made was through the two virtues of prudence and courage, or wisdom and fortitude. He says the same when recounting the forgotten history of the founding of Athens in the *Timaeus*, where the goddess Athena imparts to the people her warlike quality of courage and her rational quality of prudence. Thus when recounting the concerns of the founders of Athens Plato writes:

Again, when it comes to prudence, you no doubt see how much careful attention was paid to the cosmos right from the beginning by having discovered all that accrues to human things from those that are divine, down to divination and medicine, which aims at health, and by having acquired all other studies that follow them. . . . And you dwelled in the observance of such laws as these – indeed, laws that were still better – and you surpassed all mankind in every virtue, as was suitable for those who were the offspring and pupils of the gods.⁵

⁵ Plato *Timaeus*, 24A – D, translated by Peter Kalkavage, Focus Publishing, 2001.

It seems that the two virtues of prudence and courage make it possible to attend rightly to the cosmos and discern the knowledge that properly belongs to human flourishing. It would be really interesting to develop that theme further, but for the present I simply wish to observe that it is from these two virtues that Justice may be discerned – which of course is itself a virtue as well as a law running through all things. We recall Cicero’s beautiful description of justice, as rendering to every man his due, a description which is universally acknowledged; but I think we can ground justice at a more yet fundamental level, as *action according to the truth of things*. Expressed this way we see how it is a perfect marriage of reason and ethics, and how it complements the Stoic idea of Natural Law as acting in agreement with Nature.

Through understanding justice we come to see that the True and the Good belong together, and therefore that the modern idea that the truth of things is morally neutral is highly questionable, and why it leads to the kinds of moral debates we see over genetics or modern farming methods. For Plato and Aristotle all action has an ethical aspect and so there is no “amoral sphere” such as claimed by many modern rationalists. It is only through reducing reality to mere mechanism that the ethical dimension becomes obscured.

How, then, does all this relate to the realm of love or charity? For George that “sanctified” community he speaks of is possible only through first establishing justice. As we have seen, the knowledge of justice is a mode of knowledge that belongs to human community, and that justice can prevail only through a shared or common understanding of the truth of things, and through a resolution to act in accordance with truth. In this way “knowledge” becomes a form of obedience to reality, rather than a wilful quest to master it, as conceived in the Enlightenment. Justice, then, transforms our relationship with the world and with the whole cosmos, as Plato shows. For Aquinas “knowledge” now becomes a participation in the truth of things, and that participation is the prelude to the divine or mystical participation in God’s knowledge of both Himself and all things. But that order of knowledge and being comes through Grace, as a divine gift, and not through justice, although justice creates the precondition for the reception of grace. In the Gospels the birth into Grace is the fulfilment of the law, that for which the law itself ultimately exists. As Jesus says in *Matthew 5.17* “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil”.

The law, then, in this universal sense, has an end or purpose beyond its immediate establishment. Yet it is the immediately intelligible disclosure of the nature of things for the human mind, and it mediates the relation between society taken as a whole and the universe taken as a whole.

There is, however, a way of understanding the nature of law and justice in the Christian tradition that I would like to close with. At the highest or most divine level there is no real distinction between the laws of creation and the infinite goodness of the Creator. Within God all things are one with God, and not separate either from one another or from God. This the deepest mystery of the nature of all creatures. On the other hand, this ineffable unity of all things within the mind of God is made manifest and given distinction and particularity. The manifest creation takes form and quality, and as these forms and qualities arise and manifest from the infinite abundance of the divine goodness and love, so that love and goodness itself takes form as the law. So there is a way of seeing the visible laws of Nature and the form of the good, and this form is called Justice. Justice is the infinite love given particular form.

This way of understanding justice, which one finds in the mystics such as Maximus the Confessor and Meister Eckhart, arises from seeing the creation or the universe as itself a divine revelation, as the invisible made visible. So justice is seen according to the degree to which the mind or soul is proximate to the presence of God. If it is far away, then it will grasp justice only as retributive, or if not quite so far away, as “doing good to one’s friends and harm to one’s enemies” as in one of the early definitions thrown out by Socrates in the *Republic*. Or if near, then, as Meister Eckhart says, one’s whole being becomes nothing but justice.

This mystical way of understanding the created universe is very beautiful, yet as I believe Henry George shows us, it cannot become the common understanding without first honing all the human faculties to the visible truth of Nature. In Henry George’s own words, “. . . it is manifest that the only way by which man may attain higher things is by conforming his conduct to those commandments which are as obvious in his relations with his fellows and with external nature as though they were graven by the finger of Omnipotence upon tablets of imperishable stone”.⁶

⁶ *Social Problems*, p. 74