

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers*, Dec 20, 1890 to May 30, 1891)

Ideals

Looking backward as we draw near the close of the 19th century, we have not words in which to express our amazement and admiration at the progress of our country and people in all material matters. The evidences of increased wealth are all about us, and those things which wealth brings home so increased that all classes of society have reaped great benefits. It seems to me that one of the fundamental [] of Mr. Henry George, reforms which he bases a large part of his argument in support of his theories as to land tenure and taxation, viz. that the great improvement in scientific and mechanical matters, resulting in the increase of wealth before mentioned, has not ameliorated the condition of the poor, but rather aggravated its evils, is not correct as a matter of fact. I do not hesitate to express the belief that from highest to lowest, class for class, the people of all civilized cultures are better provided for than were their ancestors of the previous century.

Modern transportation has abolished famine in civilized countries. In former ages a succession of crop failures would produce famine in our neighborhood, while perhaps the people of another two hundred miles away would be abundantly supplied with food. The distress of their neighbors would be slow to come to their knowledge and the distance would prevent efficient relief. As the world is now bound together, the moment a deficiency is felt at one point, the surplus at another begins to move toward it; this not a charity, but in accord with the law of supply and demand. Power looms and the sewing machine enable the poor to dress as the well-to-do dressed a century ago, and the well-to-do are clothed as only the very wealthy could then afford to be. I might go on multiplying facts to show the error of Mr. George's assertion, but it is unnecessary; the more the evidence is [] the plainer it will become that the poor have profited quite as much proportionally, by the progress of improvement as other classes. So far we find that the great advance has wrought only a benefit. The [gain] to which I allude seems to arise from the rapid growth and features of this material prosperity. Wealth is so easily accumulated and buys so many comforts, that day by day the search for it seems to become more intense. The appetite grows by what it feeds on. Each new success is a spur to further endeavor. Each new invention is a source of inspiration to thousands of eager workers [] openly a society in a similar field. In commercial and even in personal life, great fortunes are won, and the advantages brought with them are so manifest that all our young men are thrilling with eagerness to go and do likewise. All this tends to intensify competition. Success in the accumulation of wealth becomes more and more the one standard by which men are judged. So eager are the contestants in the race that the tendency is to throw aside everything which may retard the runners. Little by little such encumbrances as honor, duty, patriotism are cast aside. It is incontestable that great fortunes have been accumulated because the maker thereof, was willing to go to lengths, or rather depths, to which others would not go. There are conditions, and they exist in large cities, wherein the absence of a conscience is unquestionably an element of success.

Deception seems to play a part in commercial life in exact proportion to the keenness of competition and the rewards to be obtained.

Schopenhauer whose philosophy seems to be percolating through the foundation of society, has pointed out that an exaggeration of the ego – in plain English – selfishness, is the root of nearly all evil in the world. It is beyond question the fruitful parent of vice and crime. Analyze any infraction of law, moral or municipal, and you will find its chief motive in the undue assertion of the desire of him who committed it. The burning hatred which leads to murder or the covetousness which leads to theft are of the essence of selfishness. It is to be observed that the word selfishness is here used in its popular sense, as meaning that tendency of the part of the individual to assert his own desires and to a point beyond that which he has a due regard for the rights of others; and does not mean that due assertion of self to which every individual is entitled as a component part of the universal whole.

Thus, in one sense, selfish desire to improve one's condition is as clearly the main spring of every sort of progress, as the undue extension of such desire is the root of evil. The point here is that there is a certain equilibrium or balance of forces between the individual and society, between the atom and the universe, which must be present. Now I think we may perceive how is that a state of society which stimulates selfishness tends to evil and perhaps to its own destruction.

Look into the history of any country, ancient or modern; – do we not find this to be something like the order of professions – from poverty to competency; from competency to wealth; from wealth to luxury; and thence to decay. A young miss poring over her Roman history and lamenting the fate of Hannibal, said in my hearing recently – “It seems to me that if the Carthaginians had stood by Hannibal as the Romans stood by each other, the result would have been different.” So far as I can judge from the accounts of that struggle which have come down to us, the young lady seems to have put her finger upon the cause of the failure of the one and the success of the other. The Carthaginians appear to have reached that point when the citizens were so busily engaged in grasping after individual advantages that they had no time to look after the general welfare. We can imagine their [increase] in daily grain from Syracuse or olives from Corinth, so that they had no time to listen to appeals for aid for their army in Italy; or at the [] luxuriously joking about Hannibal and his row with the Romans. Why should they turn aside from their business or their pleasures to worry about such matters – if one should do so, he might lose an opportunity to increase his wealth, or a day of pleasure – a few years later the Romans pulled the plow over the site of Carthage.

Selfishness excludes patriotism, is deaf to the call of duty, and deadens the sense of honor. Everyone has observed how the selfish individuals of the community, shirk the performance of public and social duties. They are so completely engrossed with their own affairs that they can find no time to serve on a committee, or attend a political meeting or sit as a juror. They take no interest in local affairs, and the discussion of larger questions of state are of no more import to them than the tinkling cymbal. Again I mean to and wish to emphasize the fact that wherever the state of society is such as to offer very great

rewards for individual exertion, it has a direct tendency towards the increase of selfishness, toward the increase of the class of persons referred to, whose only conception of happiness is that which is derived from the gratification of the desire for material benefits. Modern civilization makes life very pleasant to the rich. In every city there is a continuous revel from year's end to year's and in which those who are so disposed and have the means may engage. The key which opens the door to this temple of delight is wealth. Everyone therefore betakes him with redoubled energy to its accumulation. Without it, he may be esteemed— even loved —by the appreciating view, but with it, all the world is at his feet — he may not only participate in the [more] material pleasures, but the refined enjoyments brought by the higher arts are opened to him. For him the architect heaps up well-cut stones, the chisel of the sculptor brings forth exquisite shapes, the painter touches the walls with the hues of sunset; for him libraries accumulate the wisdom of mankind, decked and illustrated with the greatest of feats of the artist — Now the life of man is so short, his days are so few, that if you can place before him the opportunity for such pleasures, he is exceedingly apt to find time for little else. Occasionally one like Solomon lives through it to feel and proclaim the utter vanity of all things, but the multitude perish by the way, and their places are taken by others is eagerly treading the same path —

Consider for a moment the effects of this constantly increasing materialism; this fierce, unending struggle for the trough — Its affecting ancient Carthage has been noted. The history of most other ancient cities teaches the same lesson. Selfishness can seldom be organized and is inconsistent with popular government — To have an organization of any sort, each individual engaged in it must concede something; must give up something of his time or of labor; must be bound by the rules, even if inconsistent and must assist to forward the aims of the organization. All this selfishness forbids. Popular government rests upon mutual concession and assistance. Each citizen is presumed to take part in it; to give to it a portion of his time and attention. It presupposes a sufficient degree of public spirit, self-restraint, and liberality to enable them to do so — We weary of singing the praises of the men who amid toil and suffering, laid the foundations of the Republic, or of those who fought for the preservation of the union. They are the great examples of the virtues necessary to the institution and maintenance of our government. If we look into the history of any great institution, we shall find that its foundations were laid on self-sacrifice. Dr. Peabody's remembrances of Harvard graduates incidentally show how it was that he by labor and devotion to generations of faithful men and women that that great University has reached its present state of usefulness and a []. Anything which tends to weaken the public spirit of the people, tends to the destruction of our form of government. There is no alternative to popular government except that of delivering the control of public affairs over to a class set apart for the work — an oligarchy or a single individual. The people must either do the work for themselves, or hand it over to those who will. Our government is the greatest co-operative institution in existence, and when any large portion of the people fail to perform their duties to it, we have trouble. The tendency of the wealthy to withdraw themselves from contact with public affairs, especially in our large cities, is not a healthy system. The spirit which ignores or disdains politics, so prevalent in certain circles, is inimical to popular government, and is the direct result of the increase of wealth, and the attendant cultivation of the self.

Looking backward a little over the history of our country, we have reason to be proud of the patriotism of our people, but are not very forces which so greatly add to its material prosperity, quietly at work destroying the spirit of patriotism upon which it rests? The condition of affairs in many of our great cities seems to point to an affirmative answer to this question. Our commercial metropolis, New York, seems almost incapable of any organized effort of public spirit. This is illustrated by their failure in the matter of the World's Fair, the Grant Monument and other similar instances. The people of that splendid city are apparently so taken up with the search for wealth, or its enjoyment, that they have little time for anything else. They produce a great deal of wealth, but comparatively little in the way of literature, art or science; It is true that two or three of our principal magazines are published there, but they are mainly supplied with articles by western and southern men. In other respects there appears to have been a distinct retrogression in literary matters. Forty years ago, when a city no larger than Cincinnati now is, New York could boast the possession of two illustrious authors – Irving and Cooper. If there are now as many within her borders, I am not aware of it.

Turning to New England, we seem to find that there too the people are in danger of sinking into the soft lap of luxury, and of losing their old time fire and energy. The veterans of a former generation, Whittier, Holmes and Lowell, linger with us. These great contemporaries, Longfellow, Hawthorne and Emerson, have gone and where are their successors? McHenry James somewhere notes that the era of plain living and high thinking, the greatest era of New England history, has passed away. The living it has very much improved, but the thinking!!

The condition of municipal affairs in about every large city of the country is such as to put us to shame. Here the effects of modern materialism are most strikingly apparent. So completely have what are termed the better classes withdrawn themselves from participation in municipal affairs that they are almost wholly in the hands of the poorer and more ignorant. An occasional exception does not disprove this factual statement. Can it be that in the centers of population and wealth, the disintegration of the Republic has already commenced?

Some of the ideals which pervaded the American mind during the first half of the century seem to be passing away. One of the most marked characteristics of our people during that era was the abounding confidence in themselves and their [commitment]. This feeling pervades the entire literature of the period. It is saturated with the most intense patriotism. To such lengths was it carried that it was a favorite subject of ridicule by [] and even by our own people. It culminated in the Civil War, during which we dwelt upon the heights of patriotism. Since that we have passed much of time in the valley of humiliation.

Is there any remedy, or shall modern civilization run its course to extinction in the same abyss into which all the civilizations of antiquity disappeared? This, it must be admitted, is a very large question. If any remedy is to be offered it must, to be effective, operate through the voluntary action of individuals rather than by organized effort or legislation.

As the evil arises from the undue assertion of individual will, the remedy must be found in the actions of the individual. Schopenhauer bids us look through the “Veil of Maya” – the blinding mist of self, and see that the divisions between individuals fall away, so that he who does wrong to another has also done wrong to his own self. The comprehension of this great truth would undoubtedly go a long way toward remedying the evils indicated, but is not necessarily a complete remedy, for it furnishes no standard for discrimination between right and wrong. It is very well indeed to know that one must be in harmony with his surroundings, and that a wrong to another is a wrong to himself, but the question often arises in an intensely political form – what is right? Or conversely – What is wrong? Our philosopher appears to recognize this difficulty, for he does not stop with pointing out the necessity for harmony between individuals and environment, but gives us a number of other remedies for the ills of life, and especially the great evil of Egoism. He holds up for us the contemplation of the ideal, and the cultivation of a taste for the beautiful in art and nature, as a relief from much of the evil of life. It must, however, be admitted that the latter are rather alleviations than remedies; and if we look clearly into the matter, I fear it will be found that the pleasure derived from the contemplation of the beautiful is of the Earth – Earthy; material rather than spiritual; selfish rather than benevolent. Impressed apparently by the inadequacy of such remedies, Schopenhauer goes the whole length of the Buddhist philosophy, from which this portion of his work is avowedly derived, and holds that it is only by the complete emancipation of the will, i.e., the suppression of all desire, that humanity can be elevated to its highest point. So we are told that by the practice of the most rigid asceticism, through fasting, poverty, the crucifixion of the flesh and the denial of everything in the shape of a natural appetite or desire, we may at least arrive at a condition of mind and body, whence all can contemplate all the events of life without emotion, and so attain the last and highest state of humanity – the Nirvana of the Buddhist.

The example of those who have practiced the most extreme asceticism is held up for our imitation. We are in effect bidden to flee from the world and to betake ourselves each one to his cave; there to pass our time in solitary fasting and meditation. To my very practical American understanding, this seems something like a reductio ad absurdum. This heathen paradise is to be obtained by the renunciation of all human ties and interests. The evils of life are to be escaped by practically giving it up altogether. All family and social obligations are to be avoided or sundered and each is to live for self, thriving by the methods indicated to attain self perfection. All this sounds to me like a cry of sheer desperation. Life is a bad business at best. There is no such thing as happiness. The nearest one can attain to it is to escape suffering. Therefore have done with the whole affair – we are hopelessly defeated. *Suave qui pevit!* This seems to be a correct statement of this part of the Buddhist philosophy as expounded by its most distinguished European exponent. Apart from the practical objections which the general adoption of such a mode of life would entail, it seems all but absurd in point of logic. The life of a recluse such as commanded, is perhaps the most selfish existence which can be imagined, yet this is [] propounded as the supreme remedy for the evils of Egoism. Possibly it may be dependent upon the homeopathic principle similia similibus and it is hard to find any other ground for its justification, or even to consider it seriously. The doctrines of Buddha appeared to have filled India with monasteries and mendicant orders, and these appear to have

produced that result which has always ensued when such modes of life have been attempted on a large scale. There are perhaps exceptional individuals unfitted to grapple with the difficulties of ordinary life, or broken by adversity, for whom the secluded life is best adapted, and the Christian church in making provision for these people, simply maintains a charity, as it would a hospital, or an orphan asylum. History seems to show that when ever this mode of life is adopted by large numbers, it inevitably leads to great abuses. The great order of Knights Templar which was suppressed by the Church in medieval times because of the abuses which flourished in it, is a case in point; and while it is improbable to discover any justification for such a wholesale confiscation of property is occurred in England when the monasteries were suppressed, yet the "Black Book" which was laid before Parliament, containing the evidence taken by the Royal Commissioners, after making all due allowances for bias and exaggeration, unquestionably contained a great mass of evidence going to show that corrupt practices extensively prevailed in these institutions. The greatest example of this sort of evil, however appears to have been furnished in the land of Buddha, and is a result of his teachings. The history of the era is obscure and its records not perhaps fully worked out by European scholars, but enough is known to show that the mendicant and monastic orders established by the followers of Buddha had filled India with the evils of their idle and dissolute lives to such an extent that the people rose up on them with great fury, and persecuted them with such vehemence and success as to result in their total extermination, so that there is not now a Buddhist in the land of its origin.

It seems to me that any general attempt to practice celibacy, fasting and seclusion, must result in similar failure. It is in effect an attempt to suppress the elementary trails of humanity, to squeeze the human nature out of a man. How this can be done and yet have your men remain, will I fear, continue an unresolved problem. The attempt strengthens the point of attack. Nature immediately reinforces the place endangered. The persecuted faculties are intensified, and break forth with violence into excess.

The danger which now confronts us is not, however, one which arises from any excess of asceticism, but rather the reverse; as we have before observed. The ascetic philosophy has in time past played a great part in human affairs. Christianity is structured with it – Protestantism apparently having the larger infusion, and it was of the essence of the Puritan movement. In drawing men away from the merely material side of life, teaching self-control and self denial, the ascetic philosophy has been of immense service to humanity, and it cannot be denied that such teaching is good and wholesome, any more than that when the self-denial is carried to such a point as to constitute an attack on human nature, it is injurious and defeats itself.

Schopenhauer has rendered great service in pointing out the basis of morals, or rather of immorality, and in combating the excessively material tendencies of the age, but we cannot profitably follow him in his [] flight to the extreme of asceticism. The attempt to solve the problem of existence by eliminating humanity has been made in good faith in countless instances, but has only resulted in the extinction of the individual devotee, without benefit to his kind.

Again we come to the question, Is there any remedy for the selfish and material tendencies which threaten the destruction of society. It is very doubtful whether there is any radical remedy available, but the constant cultivation of the spirit of self-denial and an enlightened patriotism which shall keep continually before the eyes of all the fact that the interest of each is bound up in that of the whole community may do much. Yet this little fact, obvious upon very brief consideration, has never yet sufficed to furnish an adequate restraint to individual selfishness when stimulated by the vast rewards such as modern life offers to individual exertion. The contemplation of exalted ideals has ever been one of the most efficient checks to materialism. Here is and always has been a great [] of religion – Any system or religion whether Buddhist, Mohammedan or Christian which furnishes its followers with ideals that draw them away from the merely animal side of life, and inculcates lessons of right, duty and justice, renders an individual service to them. Moses and the prophets, and Christ with his perfectly unselfish life, have saved countless millions from sinking down into the quagmire of self through which humanity is ever struggling. A conscious faith; a general belief in some ideal elevating in its tendency, has always been one of the greatest sources of strength to the people. Mohammed imported the most enormous power to the Arab race when he cast down their idols, and bade them look only to the one God, the dispenser of justice. The simple cry “Save the Holy Sepulcher” furnished justification to Europe for centuries, and furnished an immense force toward the elevation of the people. In the Protestant Reformation and the Puritan movement, as well as in the founding of our Republic, may be perceived the power and value of faith. Indeed the power is everywhere acknowledged, and history is filled with examples of it. But I am more directly concerned with its value to the individual. Faith in any ideal, other than a selfish one, if firmly held and conscientiously acted upon, is of value to the believer for the reasons we have long been discussing. Speaking upon this point, a shrewd if somewhat cynical observer said to me recently – “What the world now needs is a delusion” – I replied – “You mean a faith, an ideal” – “No” said he. “I mean a delusion for it's not important that what they believe shall be true, but only that they firmly believe.” While we may not entirely subscribe to this radical utterance, it seems to me that its author has noted one of the causes which is cooperating with the increase of wealth to cultivate the lower side of human nature. The want of a general belief is more apparent than at any previous time in our history. During colonial times religion furnished rather more than the necessary amount of faith. From the beginning of the war of the revolution down to the close of the Civil War, faith in people and the infallibility of Republican institutions was the inspiration of every popular movement. It fought our wars and furnished us with a national literature. Now however the people seem to be turning away from their former idols. Religious faith lacks its old time intensity. The charitable, external side of Christianity flourishes, but nobody stops long to discuss doctrine in these [] times of theological peace and secular criticism. There are those here who can remember the ancient battle, between Americanism and colonialism; between free will and predestination, and the fierceness thereof – How completely is it all forgotten. So too with references to public affairs. There have been many who have ceased to worship the popular fetish, and who claim to have discovered that the voice of the people is not always the voice of God. These same skeptical wretches go so far as to assert that a republican form of government is not a cure for all the ills that flesh is heir to. It is not an age of belief; rather the reverse.

Whither then shall we turn for the saving ideal? Only a bold man would answer that question. Men who have furnished a people with a new face have been rated as Saints and Profits. The desired relief may come. We can only wait; and in the meantime combat the ancient devil, greed, with the old weapons, truth, justice, benevolence, and the inculcation of some of the truths before mentioned, together with more complete education and more thorough understanding of the causes leading to decay; may assist to place humanity on a higher ground than it has yet occupied, and long postponed the day of dissolution

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