The Humanitarian with the Guillotine

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Most of the harm in the world is done by good people, and not by accident, lapse, or omission. It is the result of their deliberate actions, long persevered in, which they hold to be motivated by high ideals toward virtuous ends. This is demonstrably true; nor could it occur otherwise. The percentage of positively malignant, vicious, or depraved persons is necessarily small, for no species could survive if its members were habitually and consciously bent upon injuring one another. Destruction is so easy that even a minority of persistently evil intent could shortly exterminate the unsuspecting majority of well-disposed persons. Murder, theft, rapine, and destruction are easily within the power of every individual at any time. If it is presumed that they are restrained only by fear or force, what is it they fear, or who would turn the force against them if all men were of like mind? Certainly if the harm done by willful criminals were to be computed, the number of murders, the extent of damage and loss, would be found negligible in the sum total of death and devastation wrought upon human beings by their kind. Therefore it is obvious that in periods when millions are slaughtered, when torture is practiced, starvation enforced, oppression made a policy, as at present over a large part of the world, and as it has often been in the past, it must be at the behest of very many good people, and even by their direct action, for what they consider a worthy object. When they are not the immediate executants, they are on record as giving approval, elaborating justifications, or else cloaking facts with silence, and discountenancing discussion.

Obviously this could not occur without cause or reason. And it must be understood, in the above passage, that by good people we mean good people, persons who would not of their own conscious intent act to hurt their fellow men, nor procure such acts, either wantonly or for a personal benefit to themselves. Good people wish well to their fellow men, and wish to guide their own actions accordingly. Further, we do not here imply any "transvaluation of values," confusing good and evil, or suggesting that good produces evil, or that there is no difference between good and evil, or between good and ill-disposed persons; nor is it suggested that the virtues of good people are not really virtues.

Then there must be a very grave error in the means by which they seek to attain their ends. There must even be an error in their primary axioms, to permit them to continue using such means. Something is terribly wrong in the procedure, somewhere. What is it?

Certainly the slaughter committed from time to time by barbarians invading settled regions, or the capricious cruelties of avowed tyrants, would not add up to one-tenth the horrors perpetrated by rulers with good intentions.

As the story has come down to us, the ancient Egyptians were enslaved by Pharaoh through a benevolent scheme of "ever normal granaries." Provision was made against famine; and then the people were forced to barter property and liberty for such reserves which had previously been taken from their own production. The inhuman hardness of the ancient Spar-tans was practiced for a civic ideal of virtue.

The early Christians were persecuted for reasons of state, the collective welfare; and they resisted for the right of personality, each because he had a soul of his own. Those killed by Nero for sport were few compared to those put to death by later emperors for strictly "moral" reasons. Gilles de Retz, who murdered children to gratify a beastly perversion, killed no more than fifty or sixty in all. Cromwell ordered the massacre of thirty thousand people at once, including infants in arms, in the name of righteousness. Even the brutalities of Peter the Great had the pretext of a design to benefit his subjects.

The present war, begun with a perjured treaty made by two powerful nations (Russia and Germany), that they might crush their smaller neighbors with impunity, the treaty being broken by a surprise attack on the fellow conspirator, would have been impossible without the internal political power which in both cases was seized on the excuse of doing good to the nation. The lies, the violence, the wholesale killings, were practiced first on the people of both nations by their own respective governments. It may be said, and it may be true, that in both cases the wielders of power are vicious hypocrites; that their conscious objective was evil from the beginning; none the less, they could not have come by the power at all except with the consent and assistance of good people. The Communist regime in Russia gained control by promising the peasants land, in terms the promisers knew to be a lie as understood. Having gained power, the Communists took from the peasants the land they already owned; and exterminated those who resisted. This was done by plan and intention; and the lie was praised as "social engineering," by socialist admirers in America. If that is engineering, then the sale of fake mining stock is engineering. The whole population of Russia was put under duress and terror; thousands were murdered without trial; millions were

worked to death and starved to death in captivity. Likewise the whole population of Germany was put under duress and terror, by the same means. With the war, Russians in German prison camps, Germans in Russian prison camps, are enduring no worse and no other fate than that their compatriots in as great numbers have endured and are enduring from their own governments in their own countries. If there is any slight difference, they suffer rather less from the vengeance of avowed enemies than from the proclaimed benevolence of their compatriots. The conquered nations of Europe, under the Russian or German heel, are merely experiencing what Russians and Germans have been through for years, under their own national regimes.

Further, the principal political figures now wielding power in Europe, including those who have sold their countries to the invader, are socialists, ex-socialists, or communists; men whose creed was the collective good.

With all this demonstrated to the hilt, we have the peculiar spectacle of the man who condemned millions of his own people to starvation, admired by philanthropists whose declared aim is to see to it that everyone in the world has a quart of milk. A graduate professional charity worker has flown half around the world to seek an interview with this master of his trade, and to write rhapsodies on being granted such a privilege. To keep themselves in office, for the professed purpose of doing good, similar idealists welcome the political support of grafters, convicted pimps, and professional thugs. This affinity of these types invariably reveals itself, when the occasion arises. But what is the occasion?

Why did the humanitarian philosophy of eighteenth century Europe usher in the Reign of Terror? It did not happen by chance; it followed from the original premise, objective and means proposed. The objective is to do good to others as a primary justification of existence; the means is the power of the collective; and the premise is that "good" is collective.

The root of the matter is ethical, philosophical, and religious, involving the relation of man to the universe, of man's creative faculty to his Creator. The fatal divergence occurs in failing to recognize the norm of human life. Obviously there is a great deal of pain and distress incidental to existence. Poverty, illness, and accident are possibilities which may be reduced to a minimum, but cannot be altogether eliminated from the hazards mankind must encounter. But these are not desirable conditions, to be brought about or perpetuated. Naturally children have parents, while most adults are in fair health most

of their lives, and are engaged in useful activity which brings them a livelihood. That is the norm and the natural order. Ills are marginal. They can be alleviated from the marginal surplus of production; otherwise nothing at all could be done. Therefore it cannot be supposed that the producer exists only for the sake of the non-producer, the well for the sake of the ill, the competent for the sake of the incompetent; nor any person merely for the sake of another. (The logical procedure, if it is held that any person exists only for the sake of another, was carried out in semi-barbarous societies, when the widow or followers of a dead man were buried alive in his grave.)

The great religions, which are also great intellectual systems, have always recognized the conditions of the natural order. They enjoin charity, benevolence, as a moral obligation, to be met out of the producer's surplus. That is, they make it secondary to production, for the inescapable reason that without production there could be nothing to give. Consequently they prescribe the most severe rule, to be embraced only voluntarily, for those who wish to devote their lives wholly to works of charity, from contributions. Always this is regarded as a special vocation, because it could not be a general way of life. Since the almoner must obtain the funds or goods he distributes from the producers, he has no authority to command; he must ask. When he subtracts his own livelihood from such alms, he must take no more than bare subsistence. In proof of his vocation, he must even forego the happiness of family life, if he were to receive the formal religious sanction. Never was he to derive comfort for himself from the misery of others.

The religious orders maintained hospitals, reared orphans, distributed food. Part of such alms was given unconditionally, that there might be no compulsion under the cloak of charity. It is not decent to make a man strip his soul in return for bread. This is the real difference when charity is enjoined in the name of God, and not on humanitarian or philanthropic principles. If the sick were cured, the hungry fed, orphans cared for until they grew up, it was certainly good, and the good cannot be computed in merely physical terms; but such actions were intended to tide the beneficiaries over a period of distress and restore them to the norm if possible. If the distressed could partly help themselves, so much the better. If they could not, that fact was recognized. But most of the religious orders made a concurrent effort to be productive, that they might give of their own surplus, as well as distributing donations. When they performed productive work, such as building, teaching for a reasonable fee, farming, or incidental industries and arts, the results were lasting, not only in the particular products, but in enlargement of knowledge and advanced methods, so that in

the long run they raised the norm of welfare. And it should be noted that these enduring results derived from self-improvement.

What can one human being actually do for another? He can give from his own funds and his own time whatever he can spare. But he cannot bestow faculties which nature has denied; nor give away his own subsistence without becoming dependent himself. If he earns what he gives away, he must earn it first. Surely he has a right to domestic life if he can support a wife and children. He must therefore reserve enough for himself and his family to continue production. No one person, though his income be ten million dollars a year, can take care of every case of need in the world. But supposing he has no means of his own, and still imagines that he can make "helping others" at once his primary purpose and the normal way of life, which is the central doctrine of the humanitarian creed, how is he to go about it? Lists have been published of the Neediest Cases, certified by secular charitable foundations which pay their own officers handsomely. The needy have been investigated, but not relieved. Out of donations received, the officials pay themselves first. This is embarrassing even to the rhinoceros hide of the professional philanthropist. But how is the confession to be evaded? If the philanthropist could command the means of the producer, instead of asking for a portion, he could claim credit for production, being in a position to give orders to the producer. Then he can blame the producer for not carrying out orders to produce more.

If the primary objective of the philanthropist, his justification for living, is to help others, his ultimate good requires that others shall be in want. His happiness is the obverse of their misery. If he wishes to help "humanity," the whole of humanity must be in need. The humanitarian wishes to be a prime mover in the lives of others. He cannot admit either the divine or the natural order, by which men have the power to help themselves. The humanitarian puts himself in the place of God.

But he is confronted by two awkward facts; first, that the competent do not need his assistance; and second, that the majority of people, if unperverted, positively do not want to be "done good" by the humanitarian. When it is said that everyone should live primarily for others, what is the specific course to be pursued? Is each person to do exactly what any other person wants him to do, without limits or reservations? and only what others want him to do? What if various persons make conflicting demands? The scheme is impracticable. Perhaps then he is to do only what is actually "good" for others. But will those others know what is good for them? No, that is ruled out by the same difficulty. Then shall A do what he thinks is good for B, and B do what he thinks is good for A? Or shall A accept only what he thinks is good for B, and vice versa? But

that is absurd. Of course what the humanitarian actually proposes is that he shall do what he thinks is good for everybody. It is at this point that the humanitarian sets up the guillotine.

What kind of world does the humanitarian contemplate as affording him full scope? It could only be a world filled with bread-lines and hospitals, in which nobody retained the natural power of a human being to help himself or to resist having things done to him. And that is precisely the world that the humanitarian arranges when he gets his way. When a humanitarian wishes to see to it that everyone has a quart of milk, it is evident that he hasn't got the milk, and cannot produce it himself, or why should he be merely wishing? Further, if he did have a sufficient quantity of milk to bestow a quart on everyone, as long as his proposed beneficiaries can and do produce milk for themselves, they would say no, thank you. Then how is the humanitarian to contrive that he shall have all the milk to distribute, and that everyone else shall be in want of milk?

There is only one way, and that is by the use of the political power in its fullest extension. Hence the humanitarian feels the utmost gratification when he visits or hears of a country in which everyone is restricted to ration cards. Where subsistence is doled out, the desideratum has been achieved, of general want and a superior power to "relieve" it. The humanitarian in theory is the terrorist in action.

The good people give him the power he demands because they have accepted his false premise. The advance of science lent it a specious plausibility, with the increase in production. Since there is enough for everybody, why cannot the "needy" be provided for first, and the question thus disposed of permanently?

At this point it is asked, how are you to define the "needy," and from what source and by what power is provision to be made for them, kind-hearted persons may exclaim indignantly: "This is quibbling; narrow the definition to the very limit, but at the irreducible minimum you cannot deny that a man who is hungry, ill-clad, and without shelter is needy. The source of relief can only be the means of those who are not in such need. The power already exists; if there can be a right to tax people for armies, navies, local police, road-making, or any other imaginable purpose, surely there must be a prior right to tax people for the preservation of life itself."

Very well; take a specific case. In the hard times of the Nineties, a young journalist in Chicago was troubled by the appalling hardships of the unemployed. He tried to believe that any man honestly willing to work could find employment; but to make

sure, he investigated a few cases. Here was one, a youth from a farm, where the family maybe got enough to eat but was short of everything else; the farm boy had come to Chicago looking for a job, and would certainly have taken any kind of work, but there was none. Let it be supposed he might have begged his way home; there were others who were half a continent and an ocean from their homes. They couldn't get back, by any possible effort of their own; and there is no quibbling about that. They couldn't. They slept in alleyways, waited for meager rations at soup-kitchens; and suffered bitterly. There is another thing; among these unemployed were some persons, it is impossible to say how many, who were exceptionally enterprising, gifted, or competent; and that is what got them into their immediate plight. They had cut loose from dependence at a peculiarly hazardous time; they had taken a long chance. Extremes met among the unemployed; the extremes of courageous enterprise, of sheer ill-luck and of downright improvidence and incompetence. A blacksmith working near Brooklyn Bridge who gave a penniless wanderer ten cents to pay the bridge toll couldn't know he was making that advance to immortality in the person of a future Poet Laureate of England. But John Masefield was the wanderer. So it is not implied that the needy are necessarily "undeserving." There were also people in the country, in drought or insect-plagued areas, who were in dire want, and must have literally starved if relief had not been sent them. They didn't get much either, and that in haphazard, ragbag sort. But everyone struggled through to an amazing recovery of the whole country.

Incidentally, there would have been much more severe distress instead of simple poverty at the subsistence line, but for neighborly giving which was not called charity. People always give away a good deal, if they have it; it is a human impulse, which the humanitarian plays on for his own purpose. What is wrong with institutionalizing that natural impulse in a political agency?

Very well again; had the farm boy done anything wrong in leaving the farm, where he did have enough to eat, and going to Chicago on the chance of getting a job?

If the answer is yes, then there must be a rightful power which shall prevent him leaving the farm without permission. The feudal power did that. It couldn't prevent people from starving; it merely compelled them to starve right where they were born.

But if the answer is no, the farm boy didn't do wrong, he had a right to take that chance, then exactly what is to be done to make certain he will not be in hard luck when he gets to his chosen destination? Must a job be provided for any person at any place he chooses to go? That is absurd. It can't be done. Is he entitled to relief anyhow, when he

gets there, as long as he chooses to stay; or at least to a return ticket home? That is equally absurd. The demand would be unlimited; no abundance of production could meet it.

Then what of the people who were impoverished by drought; could they not be given political relief? But there must be conditions. Are they to receive it just as long as they are in need, while they stay where they are? (They cannot be financed for indefinite travel.) That is just what has been done in recent years; and it kept relief recipients for seven years together in squalid surroundings, wasting time, work, and seed-grain in the desert.

The truth is that if any proposed method of caring for the marginal want and distress incident to human life by establishing a permanent fixed charge upon production would be adopted most gladly by those who now oppose it, if it were practicable. They oppose it because it is impracticable in the nature of things. They are the people who have already devised all the partial expedients possible, in the way of private insurance; and they know exactly what the catch is, because they come up against it when they try to make secure provision for their own dependents.

The insuperable obstacle is that it is absolutely impossible to get anything out of production ahead of maintenance.

If it were a fact that the producers generally, the industrial managers and others, had hearts of chilled steel, and cared nothing whatever about human suffering, still it would be most convenient for them if the question of relief for all kinds of distress, whether unemployment, illness or old age, could be settled once for all, so they need hear no more of it. They are always under attack on this point; and it doubles their trouble whenever industry hits a depression. The politicians can get votes out of distress; the humanitarians land lucrative white collar jobs for themselves distributing relief funds; only the producers, both capitalists and workingmen, have to take the abuse and pay the shot.

The difficulty is best shown in a concrete instance. Suppose a man owning a profitable business in sound condition with a long record of good management wishes to arrange that his family shall have their support from it indefinitely. He might as owner be in a position to give first lien bonds yielding a certain amount; say it was only $5,000 a year on a business which was paying $100,000 a year net profit. That is the very best he could do; and if ever the business failed to produce $5,000 net profit, his family wouldn't get the money, and that's all there is to it. They might put the concern through

bankruptcy and take the assets, and the assets after bankruptcy might be worth nothing at all. You can't get anything out of production ahead of maintenance.

Aside from that, of course his family might hypothecate the bonds, hand them over to the "management" of some "benevolent" friend—a thing which has been known to happen—and then they wouldn't get the money anyhow. That is about what occurs with organized charities having endowments. They support a lot of kind friends in cushy jobs.

But what if the business man, through the warmth of his generous affection, fixed it irrevocably so that his wife and family had an open checking account on the company's funds, to draw just what they pleased. He might feel innocently sure they would not take more than a small percentage, for their reasonable needs. But the day might come when the cashier must tell the happy wife there was no money to honor her check; and with such an arrangement it is certain that the day would come rather soon. In either case, just when the family needed money most, the business would yield least.

But the procedure would be completely insane if the business man gave to a third party an irrevocable power to draw as much as he pleased from the company's funds, with only an unenforceable understanding that the third party would support the owner's family. And that is what the proposal to care for the needy by the political means comes to. It gives the power to the politicians to tax without limit; and there is absolutely no way to ensure that the money shall go where it was intended to go. In any case, the business will not stand any such unlimited drain.

Why do kind-hearted persons call in the political power? They cannot deny that the means for relief must come from production. But they say there is enough and to spare. Then they must assume that the producers are not willing to give what is "right." Further they assume that there is a collective right to impose taxes, for any purpose the collective shall determine. They localize that right in "the government," as if it were self-existent, forgetting the American axiom that government itself is not self-existent, but is instituted by men for limited purposes. The taxpayer himself hopes for protection from the army or navy or police; he uses the roads; hence his right to insist on limiting taxation is self-evident. The government has no "rights" in the matter, but only a delegated authority.

But if taxes are to be imposed for relief, who is the judge of what is possible or beneficial? It must be either the producers, the needy, or some third group. To say it shall be all three together is no answer; the verdict must swing upon majority or

plurality drawn from one or other group. Are the needy to vote themselves whatever they want? Are the humanitarians, the third group, to vote themselves control of both the producers and the needy? (That is what they have done.) The government is thus supposed to be empowered to give "security" to the needy. It cannot. What it does is to seize the provision made by private persons for their own security, thus depriving everyone of every hope or chance of security. It can do nothing else, if it acts at all. Those who do not understand the nature of the action are like savages who might cut down a tree to get the fruit; they do not think over time and space, as civilized men must think.

We have seen the worst that can happen when there is only private relief and improvised municipal doles of a temporary character. Unorganized private giving is random and sporadic; it has never been able to prevent suffering completely. But neither does it perpetuate the dependence of its beneficiaries. It is the method of capitalism and liberty. It involves extraordinary downswings and upswings, but the upswings were always higher each time, and of longer duration than the downswings. And in the most distressful periods, there was no real famine, no black despair, but a queer kind of angry, active optimism and an unfaltering belief in better times ahead, which the outcome justified. Unofficial, sporadic private donations did actually serve the purpose. It worked, however imperfectly.

On the other hand, what can the political power do? One of the alleged "abuses" of capitalism was the sweatshop. Immigrants came to America, penniless and ignorant of the language and with no skilled trade; they were hired for very low wages, worked long hours in slum surroundings, and were said to be exploited. Yet mysteriously in time they improved their condition; the great majority attained comfort, and some gained wealth. Could the political power have provided lucrative jobs for everyone who wished to come? Of course it could not and cannot. Nevertheless, the good people called in the political power to alleviate the hard lot of these newcomers. What did it do? Its first requirement was that each immigrant should bring with him a certain sum of money. That is to say, it cut off the most needy abroad from their sole hope. Later, when the political power in Europe had reduced life to a gloomy hell, but a large number of persons might still have scraped together the requisite sum for admittance to America, the political power here simply cut down admission to a quota. The more desperate the need, the less chance could the political power allow them. Would not many millions in Europe be glad and grateful if they could have even the poorest chance the old system afforded, instead of convict camps, torture cellars, vile humiliations, and violent death?

The sweatshop employer hadn't much capital. He risked the little he had in hiring people. He was accused of doing them a horrible wrong, and his business cited as revealing the intrinsic brutality of capitalism.

The political official is tolerably well-paid, in a permanent job. Risking nothing himself, he gets his pay for thrusting desperate people back from the borders, as drowning men might be beaten back from the sides of a well-provisioned ship. What else can he do? Nothing. Capitalism did what it could; the political power does what it can. Incidentally, the ship was built and stored by capitalism.

As between the private philanthropist and the private capitalist acting as such, take the case of the truly needy man, who is not incapacitated, and suppose that the philanthropist gives him food and clothes and shelter—when he has used them up, he is just where he was before, except that he may have acquired the habit of dependence. But suppose someone with no benevolent motive whatever, simply wanting work done for his own reasons, should hire the needy man for a wage. The employer has not done a good deed. Yet the condition of the employed man has actually been changed. What is the vital difference between the two actions?

It is that the unphilanthropic employer has brought the man he employed back, into the production line, on the great circuit of energy; whereas the philanthropist can only divert energy in such manner that there can be no return into production, and therefore less likelihood of the object of his benefaction finding employment.

This is the profound, rational reason why human beings shrink from relief, and hate the very word. It is also the reason why those who perform works of charity under a true vocation do their best to keep it marginal, and gladly yield the opportunity to "do good" in favor of any chance for the beneficiary to work on any half-tolerable terms. Those who cannot avoid going on relief feel and exhibit the results in their physical being; they are cut off from the living springs of self-renewing energy, and their vitality sinks.

The result, if they are kept on relief long enough by the determined philanthropists and politicians in concert, has been described by a relief agent. At first, the "clients" applied reluctantly. "In a few months all that changes. We find that the fellow who wanted just enough to tide him over has settled back to living on relief as a matter of course." The relief agent who said that was himself "living on relief as a matter of course"; but he was a long step lower than his client, in that he did not even recognize his own condition. Why was he able to evade the truth? Because he could hide himself behind

the philanthropic motive. “We help to prevent starvation, and we see to it that these people have some sort of shelter and bedding.” If the agent were asked, do you grow the food, do you build the shelter, or do you give the money out of your own earnings to pay for them, he would not see that that made any difference. He has been taught that it is right to “live for others,” for “social aims” and “social gains.” As long as he can believe he is doing that, he will not ask himself what he is necessarily doing to those others, nor where the means must come from to support him.

If the full roll of sincere philanthropists were called, from the beginning of time, it would be found that all of them together by their strictly philanthropic activities have never conferred upon humanity one-tenth of the benefit derived from the normally self-interested efforts of Thomas Alva Edison, to say nothing of the greater minds who worked out the scientific principles which Edison applied. Innumerable speculative thinkers, inventors, and organizers, have contributed to the comfort, health, and happiness of their fellow men-because that was not their objective. When Robert Owen tried to run a factory for efficient production, the process incidentally improved some very unpromising characters among his employees, who had been on relief, and were therefore sadly degraded; Owen made money for himself; and while so engaged, it occurred to him that if better wages were paid, production could be increased, having made its own market. That was sensible and true. But then Owen became inspired with a humanitarian ambition, to do good to everybody. He collected a lot of humanitarians, in an experimental colony; they were all so intent upon doing good to others that nobody did a lick of work; the colony dissolved acrimoniously; Owen went broke and died mildly crazy. So the important principle he had glimpsed had to wait a century to be rediscovered.

The philanthropist, the politician, and the pimp are inevitably found in alliance because they have the same motives, they seek the same ends, to exist for, through, and by others. And the good people cannot be exonerated for supporting them. Neither can it be believed that the good people are wholly unaware of what actually happens. But when the good people do know, as they certainly do, that three million persons (at the least estimate) were starved to death in one year by the methods they approve, why do they still fraternize with the murderers and support the measures? Because they have been told that the lingering death of the three millions might ultimately benefit a greater number. The argument applies equally well to cannibalism.