

THE MORAL AND ETHICAL BASIS OF GEORGISM

(A PRECIS)

(950 words)

--by Jack Schwartzman

The basic moral philosophy of Georgism is that justice (the rendering to each person his or her due) underlies the principles of political science (economics). "This is the universal law. This is the lesson of the centuries. Unless its foundation be laid in justice the social structure cannot stand." Justice itself is based on natural law, which governs humanity by means of eternal and immutable precepts.

Unlike the prevalent modern view that economics is the "objective" study of facts, without any necessary moralistic correlation, the Georgist contention is that economics is a "science," and, like Euclidian mathematics, is based on universal verities. One cannot violate the unchanging laws of economics. One may attempt to do so, but only at one's own risk, and subject to the social ills that follow, such as poverty, crime, and war. "If political economy is a science...it must follow the rules of science, and seek in natural law the causes of the phenomena which it investigates." The conformity to such rules is called morality or ethics.

Ethics is not etiquette (which is an artificial compilation of societal conventions). Nor is it a biologically mechanical behaviorism (which disregards aphorisms of judgment altogether). Ethics is a branch of philosophy that investigates

the normative conduct of human beings. It is, of necessity, a discipline that deals with values and standards: what a person ought to do. The Georgist position is clear: each person, since he or she possesses free will, ought to live in accordance with natural law. Each person's "duty" is to abolish injustice (which is detrimental to humanity as a whole). If the existing maldistribution of wealth (caused by failure to follow the eternal precepts of morality and justice) is not remedied, then humanity will suffer the necessary consequences. Liberty will be replaced by slavery, and civilization by barbarism. "Whence shall come the new barbarians? Go through the squalid quarters of great cities and you may see, even now, their gathering hordes! How shall learning perish? Men will cease to read, and books will kindle fires and be turned into cartridges!"

To abolish poverty and to bridge the gap between affluence and misery, one must return to the universal guidelines of justice. "The law of human progress, what is it but the moral law? Just as social adjustments promote justice, just as they acknowledge the equality of right between man and man, just as they insure to each the perfect liberty which is bounded only by the equal liberty of every other, must civilization advance. Just as they fail - this, must advancing civilization come to a halt and recede."

To be specific: Georgism examines the current scene and finds that the social malady exists because of people's failure to abide by the laws of "natural" distribution of production. To "cure" the economic ills of humanity, Georgism unqualifiedly

advocates the removal of the "unnatural" conditions of poverty, conflict, crime, and illiteracy by means of a specific formula based on natural law. Absolute adherence to natural law--that is the "true remedy" advocated by George. Either that--or the "patient" must "die."

As indicated above, Georgism contends that the principles of economics are equivalent to the absolute truths of mathematics. The answer to a mathematical riddle (contrary to the teachings of modern "relativists") is either right or wrong. The solution to an economic problem (contrary to the preachings of modern "specialists") is either just or unjust. "That alone is wise which is just; that alone is enduring which is right." The just (or the right) solution is the ONLY solution. It is expediency itself. It is morality itself. It is life itself.

The Georgist formula, the "true remedy," is to open the gates to production (to sustenance itself), thereby allowing every person on God's earth to earn his or her livelihood; to remove the artificial barriers set up by greed and ignorance; and to substitute, instead, free access to nature itself. It is to live morally. If the purpose of "being" is to "be fruitful" and to "multiply"; if the reason for human life is to fulfill that life; if the meaning of existence is to satisfy one's desires with the least exertion--then the only answer possible, the only solution available, the only remedy justifiable, is to follow one's bent for self-gratification, provided only that another human being is not harmed thereby.

It is not evil that causes iniquity; it is ignorance. Morality, therefore, is actually a "proper teaching," a means of guiding one to truth, knowledge, purpose, and happiness.

However, false or short-sighted remedies must never be substituted for the one "true remedy" that George proposes. "5" may be a "close" answer to 2 plus 2; it is, nevertheless, just as wrong (100% wrong) as "97," or "3," or "fifty billion." There is but one answer, one morality, one ethic, one rule, one axiom, one remedy. The Georgist view is that a person is either moral or is not moral. There is no compromise with absolutes.

To summarize: Morality, according to Georgism, is not merely a pious injunction of behavior, a polite convention of etiquette, or even a rigid commandment of human law: it is the Golden Rule itself! Without adherence (logically expressed and examined) to the eternal principles of proper economic distribution; without allegiance to the unperishable proverbs of wisdom; without conformity to the time-honored precepts of justice and natural rights, the Georgist philosophy becomes meaningless and non-existent. "Single tax," "land value taxation," "communal collection of rent"--these are merely methodical phrases; they are but the means to the end itself; and that end is--morality. To repeat: "Unless its foundation be laid in justice the social structure cannot stand."

Georgism and morality are, after all, only synonyms.