

IRISH SOCIAL SERVICES: A SYMPOSIUM.

(Read on Friday, 5th March, 1943)

1. THE ETHICAL ASPECT.

By E. J. COYNE, S.J.

The task allotted to me in this symposium is to consider our Irish Social Services and the Beveridge Report from the ethical point of view. I put forward Hilaire Belloc's plea when he wrote the *Path to Rome*: "Let us not be too hard upon the just but anxious fellow that sat down dutifully to paint the soul of Switzerland upon a fan." The fan of ten minutes on the clock is a small space on which to paint a vast subject.

The ethical point of view strives to consider man as man, man as a human being in his integrity: the ethical ideal or objective is that man should grow more and more in human, in integral human, in specific human perfection. *Humánitas* is, perhaps, the nearest word for it. Economics regards man not precisely as man, but as producing man: aesthetics as artistically creative man: politics as governing and being governed man—but ethics considers him as man, the human being.

And ethics draws its principles from this idea: whatever is injurious to man as man is evil, even if it is beneficial to man under some other aspect: whatever is necessary for the substantial perfection of man as man is good, even if it is injurious to him under some other, limited aspect. I have, therefore, to try to estimate what effect social services or the Beveridge Plan tend to have on the moral values in the individual citizen and in human society as a whole. Do these services contribute to the "maximising" of the moral values? Would their absence "de-humanise" society? Or "de-moralise" the individual? Or do such services and such plans tend to sacrifice specifically human values, moral values, for other values, say, purely economic or political or material ones?

I can only suggest three lines of thought to the members of this Society: suggestions rather than dogmatic assertions. I pick out three moral values for examination and analysis: Liberty, Justice, Brotherliness. These three are actually three of the most specifically human values and possibly the three that most often come in conflict with other values, economic and material ones, for instance.

I. Liberty.

At the root of all ethical or moral good lies *Liberty*: without freedom of decision and a certain independence of choice and action, there can be no Responsibility: and without responsibility there can be no specifically human perfection. It is true that in society there must be Order and Authority: but they must not smother Liberty and personal Responsibility if we are to have *human* society. Anything that brings undue force or pressure on a man—fear, for

instance, or physical violence—must be examined carefully by a moralist; for it will tend to sap *humanitas*, and make men not men but cringing animals.

The aim of social services and of the Beveridge Plan is, I take it, to free citizens precisely from the domination of fear, to give men greater liberty: fear of want, fear of disease, fear of unemployment, fear of insecurity and dependence on others. The fear of these things can paralyse a man: the absence of that fear makes him free to follow out what he knows is right and calls forth the best that is in him of personality, virtue, and economic productivity. In so far a moralist would welcome these services and plans.

But he would see two dangers to be constantly guarded against.

(a) The first is that if some very powerful body, say the State, operating through an impersonal bureaucracy, is the source from which a citizen draws his freedom from fear, anxiety, want, then he is put in the position that he may have merely passed out of the bondage of poverty and insecurity into the much more de-humanising bondage of regimentation by card-indices, a polite, but cold and cruel form of slavery. The State could (and it is not merely a "could") use the ever-growing dependence of its citizens on itself for their material comfort and security to dictate to citizens their way of life, of worship, of thought, of speech and of work. To a moralist this might mean surrendering one's birthright for a mess of pottage. One criticism of the Beveridge Plan, for instance, that has been vigorously voiced is that it removes the bulk of a man's savings, or at least a workingman's savings, from the personal control of the savers. "If you know that you will be paid and receive a pension provided you are careful passively to do as you are directed, the effect is undoubtedly cramping. As the years pass, and the pension comes nearer, it becomes more important to make no mistakes. . . ." "How compliant was So-and-So about his children's education? Did he send them to a "suitable" school? Did So-and-So prove obstinate about being retrained for some other occupation or moving to some other locality? The State can always make regulations which can be freely varied about how much and under what conditions those savings are returned to savers."

We need not attach undue weight to such criticisms, but it is well to have them in mind.

(b) The second great danger of certain types of social services from a moralist's point of view is that men may easily lose moral stamina. If a man is relieved to too great an extent from all the chances and changes of a struggle, then he is liable to become morally flabby. Human nature requires certain fairly powerful stimuli (provided by Nature herself) to move it to action at all, to make it inventive, to make it and keep it industrious, vigilant, prudent, temperate, thrifty. Actually the thought that "it depends on me and me alone to keep hunger from those I love" is a helpful spur to action. Hunger or its fear, the love of wife and family, the hope of a secure old age are Nature's own ways of calling forth the best that is in a man. They are the great motives which keep men scorning delights and living laborious days, which sharpen their inventive genius, and keep them hard at work. There is a danger, recognised, I think by all social students, that certain types of social services may sap and weaken the moral fibre of citizens, may

(as the phrase very accurately puts it) "demoralise" them, and, indeed, demoralise the whole community. The insurance type, such as envisaged in the Beveridge Plan, is, however, in my opinion, one of those least likely to have this effect.

II. Justice.

The second great moral, human value I should like to examine with you is that of *Justice*. Nothing can cause so much hatred, discontent, envy, jealousy, bitterness as either injustice itself or a sense of injustice. Anything that abolishes injustice or else shows that a feeling of injustice is unreasonable and ill-grounded is going to help men to be, and act as, human beings and is going to keep human society really human. *Opus justitiæ pax*—"the fruit of justice is peace"—the motto of the present Pope, is a very sound social principle.

I take it that all social services, at least public and State ones, rest in some way or other on the idea that they provide for a more socially just redistribution of the national income. In so far, a moralist must welcome them. Still more must he welcome any scheme based on the principle of insurance, which makes certain demands on the personal effort and personal thrift of citizens. Hence the Beveridge Plan, which is almost entirely based on insurance is, undoubtedly, a great improvement on any purely State "dole" system.

But, on the other hand, there are deeper questions involved. If the benefits of the Beveridge Plan (and of social services in general) are regarded, as they are normally are, as due in justice to the recipients, then it is a little difficult to understand where and why the initial leakage occurs. According to the ethical principles which I hold, a man should, in the very initial stages of economic process, be paid a just wage: and a just wage is one that will enable him to fulfil the primary duties which his manhood imposes upon him: the support and education of his family, the laying by of savings against death, sickness and old age. If he is not paid such a wage, there is some initial injustice taking place. This is, in our modern times, readjusted in a clumsy fashion by State intervention with various insurance schemes: but it is a clumsy form of restitution—and a restitution not always taken from the right persons. Moreover, it does necessarily bring in State intervention in a matter that should be the private concern of the individual citizen. Under all these "contributory schemes" as they are called, good and necessary as they may be as second-bests, one finds that difficulty: the danger of certain incentives being lacking which Nature uses to call forth certain healthy qualities, moral values, in men. I am not sure whether the full demands of justice (and, indeed, of economic efficiency) would not be better met under a non-centralised system of insurance—if we have to have these compulsory contributory schemes at all. I think that both from a moral point of view and from an economic one, it would be better for each industry or group of industries to carry its own insurance schemes, without any help from the central State funds at all. At least, we would then see the true cost, economic and social, of the production of commodities. At present this is concealed from us owing to the fact that these insurance schemes, sickness and unemployment, are acting as a hidden subsidy to some industries and a hidden tax on

others. We have no idea of the degree parasitic inefficiency is reducing our productive effort: this, I think, can be a source of injustice and discontent. I fear I am on very controversial ground: but I should like to see a detailed account, say, of our National Health Insurance from this point of view.

III. Brotherliness.

The third great moral human value in society is this human *Brotherliness*, camaraderie—sometimes called loving one's neighbour. To my mind, it would be a major disaster if our society lost this spirit of brotherly responsibility and helpfulness, expressing itself in a purely voluntary fashion and degree. "Am I my brother's keeper?" was a vicious question from a malicious soul at the dawn of the world. And I trust the day will never come when citizens of this country will say: "The State is my brother's keeper, not I." Yet the growth of all these semi-State schemes with the inevitable compulsory levies and taxes involved, may easily wither up the roots of all Christian charity of a voluntary kind.

I think we should be foolish to hail any plans or schemes too cordially which involve the destruction of say, the Vincent de Paul work, the Sick and Indigent Roomkeepers' Society, the thousands, literally thousands, of ladies who devote their money, their full time, their cultured kindness, their trained skill to the work of nursing, visiting the poor, blind asylums, mental homes, orphanages and the rest.

2. PUBLIC ASSISTANCE

By JOHN COLLINS

The Public Assistance Act, 1939, which came into operation last August, is now the legal basis of public assistance. It replaced the Poor Relief Acts so far as they related to the administration of relief and combines central control, exercised by the Minister for Local Government and Public Health, with local administration. The County Management Act, 1940, was put into operation on the same date as the Public Assistance Act and, accordingly, public assistance is now administered on the plan which places responsibility for the exercise of the executive functions of the local authority on a manager, reserving to the elected body ultimate financial control.

The first general poor law in this country was the Poor Relief Act of 1838. That Act was an adaptation to the circumstances of Ireland of the English poor law as amended four years earlier. The country was divided into unions, and union workhouses were erected. For every union a board of guardians was formed. The guardians carried on local administration in accordance with the law and the orders and directions of the poor law commissioners, who from the beginning exercised a strict control over every detail of the administration, with one notable exception: the commissioners were prohibited from interfering in individual cases for the purpose of ordering relief.

Up to 1847 relief could be afforded only in the workhouse. The offer of the workhouse was the test of destitution, the workhouse test, as it was called. Under the pressure of the famine the workhouse test