

## The Challenge of our Time

TIME was when all men believed that the earth was flat. It would be difficult now to trace all the errors into which this assumption led the thinking of those days, or to ascertain how many practical comforts and advantages which we now enjoy would have been missed had not this conceit been exploded. The first serious challenge to this theory raised a storm of abuse which came not merely from the vulgar and superstitious but from the leaders of science and religion. It was a grave shock to human vanity to be told that the natural universe did not revolve round the planet which man occupied, that, on the contrary, the earth was one of many satellites of a greater sun and that, consequently, there was no solid reason to believe that man was the king of creation.

It is usually some quiet assumption taken for granted by men of every degree that blocks the road to the great advancements of which mankind is capable. These false beliefs, if they persist too long, are very dangerous to human progress. Except for those involuntary and instinctive actions of which most people are ashamed, men's actions are directed by their minds. The beliefs which they hold will dominate their activity and, if these beliefs are false, they must lead to bad practices. History is full of the astonishing cruelties which have been bred of superstition. When the superstition went these particular cruelties ceased. Such is the power of human thought for good and for evil.

This civilization has scored its greatest success in the material sciences. Its glory is the willing application of these teachings to daily life. In them it has found the way of truth, but in the study of the forces governing relations between men, it has shown little aptitude.

So tragic is this failure that it turns the masterpieces of the material sciences into engines of destruction which threaten to annihilate the civilization which produced them.

This is the challenge of our time : either we must find the way of truth in the government of our relations one with another, or we must succumb to the results of our own ignorance.

An idea, which prevails these days is that the only choice before society is either to continue to suffer the evils of unemployment, poverty and all that follows upon them; to see the fruits of industry denied to the many and secured to the few; or to change over to a condition where organized government will take control of all the major industries of the world, and take charge of the life of the peoples down to the most domestic details; Except amongst those who are ardent advocates of one or other condition, there seems to be a feeling of revulsion against both, with the result that people weigh the merits of the two systems by judging which is the lesser evil. The notion that the state should care for the birth of the baby, educate the child, employ the man, care for the aged and bury the dead, seems the contradiction of all those conceptions of individual freedom which have become so dear to the English speaking races. On the other hand it is being more widely recognized that war and disaster are bred of those injustices which allow babies to be born amidst squalor and disease, which deny that education without which the child cannot attain to full development, which condemn the willing man to unemployment and allow the old to struggle to the end of life in poverty.

It would be surprising that men should see no way to solve the economic problems which harass them, save by abandoning the scope and freedom of action so hardly won in recent times, were not this view the logical deduction from a deeper belief. This fundamental notion, seldom expressed but almost universally held, is that unemployment, poverty and wars are of the very nature of things, and are bred of " Nature red in tooth and claw ".

If this idea of the natural order in human relations be right, then the conclusion drawn is inevitable. If natural forces are such that the relations between men are by nature chaotic and cruel, then it behoves man, as best he can, to restrict the play of these forces, to harness and organize society, so as to protect himself from the frightful consequences of nature's way.

On examination, however, the fundamental assumption that the law of nature is strife and conflict seems open to serious doubt and the conclusion drawn from it is even more startling.

The material sciences, in which such wonderful progress has been made, have taught us that there is nothing chaotic in the operation of natural forces in their fields of study. On the contrary they speak of forces at play in the universe which are far beyond man's control, which always operate in the same way and upon whose consistent action man is entirely dependent. Man's life would come to an end were it not for the order of the seasons, the perpetual succession of spring, summer, autumn and winter. It is established that this is the result of the rotation of the earth round the sun. In turn this rotation is due to the operation of natural forces which, it is believed, operate in solar systems other than our own and which maintain the ordered harmony of the constellations.

One of these forces, the operation of which is known as the law of gravity, holds us to the surface of the earth and enables us to move right round the circle of the globe. How utterly are men dependent upon this natural law. What a magnificent pattern it reveals. Many and various are the natural forces which material sciences have discovered. Each new discovery reinforces the truth that there is a perfect pattern in the natural world. Each new discovery explains away an apparent inconsistency in observed facts.

The material sciences have taught yet another powerful lesson, which has led to great achievements. Men have long wanted to fly, but it was not sufficient to manufacture a pair of wings which looked more or less like a bird's: first they had to

discover the natural laws governing the flight of a body through air, having learnt these they had to build a machine which conformed to them. When they succeeded in doing this, they flew. If, however, the aircraft designer failed to conform to natural law, his plane was no better than a stone. In all the material achievements of this age, the principles of progress are the same. First comes the patient search to discover the ways of nature, then the building of machines or the planning of processes in conformity with natural law so that the powerful and consistent forces of nature could work for the gratification of men's desires.

In face of these established facts, it is strange that people should tacitly accept the view that the relations between human beings in society are governed by chance.

The classical economists during the last two centuries proclaimed their study as a science. The best known and more respected of them reached the conclusion that the poverty and injustice in society were the inevitable result of the operation of natural forces and that nothing could be done about it. Paradoxically, they taught that pestilence and war were nature's devices for checking the full horror of these natural forces.

In an age where the Christian conception of the brotherhood of man had taken deep root and was slowly gaining ground, such ideas brought their inevitable reaction. Men came who said that the economists were wrong to call their study a science, it was ridiculous to believe that the operation of these natural forces was inevitable. True, if things were left alone, in accordance with the policy of *laissez faire* as it was called, these evil consequences would be inevitable, but the task of the economists was constantly to study the tendency of the times and to propose measures for checking its evil inclinations. So the economists set out to do what the physicists, chemists, astronomers and others had shown to be hopeless, they set out to check the operation of natural law. Immediately there sprang up like mushrooms a hundred different quarrelling sects of economists. Acknowledging no principle on which their study operated, their devices were as various as the features of their faces. The result is that to-day, for every proposition an economist makes, many may be found to contradict him.

It is interesting to observe that the modern schools, which rejected the classical economists because they conceived their study as a science, quietly accept the conclusion of the classical economists that social injustice is of the very nature of things. May it not be that this conclusion was reached as the result of some very grave error of observation or reasoning? May it not be that man has failed to understand the natural forces at work in society or has failed to comply with them?

Certainly the practical action in the social sphere that has resulted from this kind of thought has failed to secure any real advancement. True, many measures have been taken for the alleviation of the suffering of those reduced in poverty. Though the free schools, free medical services and social insurances have improved the health and general standard of life of the people, yet this improvement being slower than that attained in the material sciences, the general standard lags farther and farther behind that which could be achieved. More important, however, with this extension of state services, and even more with the extension of subsidies, quotas and production controls, there has come a decline in initiative, a decline in boldness and the spirit of adventure, and a decline in the level of politics that recently threatened this civilization with disaster.

Clearly, unless men generally come to understand how properly to govern their relations in society, this crisis will recur. They must understand how to use the giant powers which the material sciences have put at their disposal, unless they would continue to be, like boys in a laboratory mixing the coloured chemicals, ignorant and careless of the consequences. To attain this understanding it would seem that a new and more humble approach to the study of social relations is required. First, it is essential to find and measure the natural laws at work in society for they are above man's control and govern his every activity. An understanding of these laws must reveal the realities of the situation and show the constant factors in social life. Once ascertained, this knowledge will make easy the further understanding of how to shape society so that natural forces may operate to the greatest good.

Man has a freedom of choice for he may choose to do right or wrong. Once having chosen, however, the consequences of his act follow inevitably. The law of gravity is of sovereign good to the whole of natural creation but if a man throws himself from the top of a cliff the operation of this same law will dash him to pieces. In order to progress men must understand the forces which dominate their life, and having understood them they must bring their institutions into conformity with them.

It is in an attempt to set down afresh the principles which govern us in society and how these principles may be turned to the general good, that these pages are written.