

Freedom and Property, Part 4

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THE producer has an acknowledged claim on the produce, we have said: A claim rendered confused and vague by the wage system and by the property law of to-day, but still generally recognized among civilized men as having theoretically some justice in it. Why? To discover we must make a careful analysis of the relation between producer and produce. It is a relationship not quite so simple as may appear at the first glance to those who have been accustomed to take it for granted without thinking much about it. As there is no question which leads us more directly to the root of the Anarchist position, we propose to dwell upon it at some length.

When a man claims a thing on the ground that he is its producer, he certainly does not mean that he has made it out of nothing, as God was supposed, in the ancient Jewish legend, to have made the world. No man has yet succeeded in adding a single element to those which, as far as can be discovered, singly or in combination are the component parts of every existing object. And each element possesses its own inherent properties, its own inherent force which man can neither diminish nor increase. All that any man can do is to set these elements in motion, causing them by force of their own natures to part company, to associate, to coalesce in various forms, to unite in different proportions. As J. S. Mill says: "Putting things into fit places for being acted upon by their own integral forces, and by those residing in other natural objects, is all that man does, or can do, with matter." The relation then of the producer to the produce, upon which his claim to ownership in it is founded, depends solely upon this "setting in motion," this "putting"; in fact, upon the transmission the energy in the man to the substance wherewith he is dealing. Therefore, when the producer of a material product directly (or indirectly through some medium) sets in motion the matter of which it is to be formed, he is actually putting something which was in him into it. The thoroughness and closeness of the relation he thus enters into with the product depends on the completeness with which he expends the energy of his whole being in the process, added to the amount of energy he expends. When a man puts into the production of anything the energy of his muscles, his will and his mind, with the utmost intensity of which he is capable, during the whole of the most energetic period of his life; his relation to that thing as its producer is the completest--and most thorough possible. Thus the strength of the relation between producer and produce varies according to its completeness, to its intensity while it endures, and to the length of its duration. And, we hold, with the strength of the relation between them varies the strength of the producer's claim (in the character of producer merely) to the product. In other

words, the more the thing fashioned embodies of the personality of the fashioner, the stronger his claim to decide how it shall be used.

So much for a general summary of our position. Let us now work it out more in detail; and to begin with, let us take a very simple and trivial example and look closely into the various essential factors concerned in the productive process.

Harry, a very ordinary, Nineteenth Century young Englishman, is walking along a country lane and sees a stick that takes his fancy growing in the hedge. He climbs the bank, cuts off the branch, trims and peels it, carries it home, steams it and ties the top to a curve he likes for a handle then he lays the stick to dry and harden and finally polishes it and puts on a steel ferule. Obviously this smart walking stick differs considerably from the branch growing in the hedge. It is still wood, but wood whose form, surface and tissue have been modified by the action of many agencies, which we may classify, according to their nature, in three divisions.

In the first place, these changes have been effected by the action and counter-action of that combination of matter we call wood, with all its inherent properties and forces, and a succession of other combinations of matter, with their inherent properties and forces--steel, steam, string, air, polishing materials, etc. If any of these had been wanting, or had been in themselves other than they were, the result would not have been produced. So here we have class one of essential agencies--the non-human.

In the second place, that these substances should have been so combined and arranged as to act upon one another for the production of the walking stick implies the strenuous activities of countless human beings for countless ages. Firstly, all the activities which have gone to prepare the natural agents which we have seen acting upon the stick. Secondly, all the activities which have gone to prepare the idea of a walking stick, as it exists for the community whereof Harry is a member. Thirdly, all the activities which have gone to prepare Harry in mind and body to use that idea and those natural agents effectively. It is bewildering to attempt to realize the vast amount of human energy which is thus, indirectly but essentially, a factor in such a simple productive process as we are considering. If Harry had been living in England many thousand years ago and wanted to cut himself a tough staff, he would have had to hunt about for a sharp stone or piece of the bone of some dead beast. Later he would have had a ready-split flint flake for the purpose and later on again might have possessed a flint knife., tied into a rough wooden handle. Long ages after that a bronze dagger would have been an available implement. The other day, so to speak, if Harry had been one of the earliest Englishmen to emigrate from the mainland to this island, he might have been able to cut his stick with an iron blade. A steel-bladed, folding pocket knife is a very modern luxury. As with the knife, so with all other agents employed in the transformation of the branch into the walking stick. The string, the steaming apparatus, the polish, all involve the muscular and mental activities of numberless men; from the first wild savages who happened to bethink them of trying to divide something by rubbing it with a sharp stone or bone, or fastening things together with grasses and withes of creeper, or heating water, etc., etc., on to the export steel founders, cutlers, string makers, etc., etc., of to-day. So again as regards that general idea of a walking stick which is the common property of the society where Harry was born, so that he and all around him received it as they received impressions of horses or trees, without intending to do so or taking any trouble about it. Nevertheless the perception of a walking stick differs from the perception of a growing branch just by reason of the activities of human beings involved therein, from the ingenious expedient of those primitive ape-like animals who thought of picking up a broken bough to support their shaky steps when they walked on their hind legs, to their far

more intelligent descendants who conceived the idea of purposely breaking off branches to lean upon. And so on through those endless generations of men who have exercised their brains and hands upon the manifold diversity of staves and crutches which have been forerunners of the modern walking-stick. Further, there is Harry's own fitness in mind and body to use what has been prepared for him, a fitness in which the activities of the human beings surrounding him have played a considerable part. We are not speaking of his faculties and perceptions in general. His faculties have been developed, his perceptions suggested by his education and social surroundings and in bearing their part in the whole of his mental and physical life, have all been strongly influenced by the activities of other human beings. Such general considerations would lead us here too far afield; but if we glance only at the knowledge and skill directly required to enable him to make use of the non-human and human agencies required for making his stick, we see at once that he is immensely indebted to the activities of others. He has learned from others the uses of knives, string, steam, etc., the practical capacities of these things, and where to get and how to apply them for the special object he has in view. In fact both the main idea and the processes for its realization have been given to him by means of other people's activities. Here then we have the second class of agencies essential to the production of the walking-stick, i.e., the indirect human activities involved.

However there is evidently another essential factor in the case, a third agency, without which the other two could not be brought into action, and this, of course, is--Harry. Whatever it may have received from other things and other people the piece of wood has received something special and definite from him. "Well," you may say impatiently, "it is quite obvious what he has done. He has applied some energy, which before was lying stored up in himself, or which he was expending otherwise, in setting the wood and the other agencies concerned in motion." True; but so general a statement is something like the first rough charcoal sketch for a picture. It enables us to realize very faintly what is actually implied by it. Let us take the first stage of the productive process and examine it more particularly.

By an expenditure of his nervous and muscular energy Harry severs the bough from the parent plant. But he would have done exactly the same-- expended just as much nervous and muscular energy if he had been scrambling through the hedge and broken the branch off accidentally. And the energy transmitted by a stone, if it effected the same result in rolling down from the cliff above, would be much the same in amount. Yet under these circumstances, Harry would be about as likely as the stone to put forward a claim to the broken bough in the character of its producer, if he should chance afterwards to discover he had broken it. Obviously, in severing it for a walking-stick he has expended more than the nervous and muscular energy required by the mechanical action of severing. He has severed the piece of wood of set purpose. He has put into the action energy of will.

It is a common-place of observation how fast and how thoroughly a man may exhaust his energy by the exercise of his will. We all know that when a man "works with a will," "puts his heart [it should be "his will"] into what he is about," he is sooner knocked up and obliged to rest before he can go on again than if he is merely exerting himself mechanically or listlessly plodding along. And this happens just the same if the work he is about is work of brain or of hand. Further, we know that a man may be utterly exhausted without stirring a finger, simply by having to make a great effort of will. Whatever the human will may be--and no one seems yet to have lit upon a satisfactory definition or explanation of it--there is no doubt that its exercise involves expenditure of energy. Therefore when he cuts the branch, Harry is expending his energy in a

twofold manner; through his muscles and the nerves which direct their mechanical action and through his exercise of will. But this two-fold expenditure of energy on his part would have taken place just the same if he had intentionally cut off the stick merely because it was in his way when he wanted to get through the hedge. And if he had picked the severed stick up and, being in a bad temper, had carried it away with him and hit all the stones and bushes he passed until he had smashed the stick to pieces, he would most probably have expended as much energy both of muscle and will as if he had taken all needful measures to transform the rough bough into a walking-stick. Evidently then Harry's energy when he sets about producing a walking-stick, is expended in some third way, which we have yet to analyze.

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