

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Freedom Press (London)
The Moral Basis of Socialism
November, 1888

Freedom: A Journal of Anarchist Socialism, Vol. 3, No. 26,
online source RevoltLib.com, retrieved on April 12, 2020.

theanarchistlibrary.org

The Moral Basis of Socialism

Freedom Press (London)

November, 1888

*(By a non-Anarchist correspondent.)**

The above written title is that of an essay by Mr. Karl Pearson, to whose opinions on Socialism some reference was made in the October number of *Freedom*. The essay has for some time past been familiar to us in pamphlet form, and is re-issued in Mr. Pearson's recently published volume of contributions to 'The Ethic of Freethought.' Now that it is thus surrounded and buttressed by complementary dissertations, it is perhaps not unfair to give utterance to a dissatisfaction which will have been felt by a good many Socialists at the manner in which the promise of the title has been fulfilled. and to attempt some indication of what it is that is required for its fulfillment.

"Not from fear of hell," writes Mr. Pearson, "not from hope of heaven, from no love of a tortured man-god but solely for the sake of the society of which I am a member, and the welfare of which is my welfare-for the sake of my fellow-men-I act morally, that is, socially. Positivism has recognized in it vague impracticable fashion this, the, only possible basis of a rational morality; it places the progress of mankind in the center of its creed, and venerates a personified Humanity. Socialism as

a more practical faith teaches us that the *first duty* of man is to no general concept of Humanity but to the group of humans to which he belongs" (Positivism, as Mr. Pearson ought to know, teaches precisely the same) "and that man's veneration is due to the state which personifies that social group." I must protest in passing, that I, and I think most other people, are more disposed to venerate Humanity than the British Public, the county of London than the parish of Paddington, and that Mr. Pearson's distinction appears to me to tend towards the vestrification of religion. But, to quote further, "Corporate society-the State, not personified Humanity,-becomes the center of the Socialist's faith."..."Socialism demands of each individual service to Society incorporated in the State." . . . "The strength of the family tie is disappearing. We must learn to replace it in time by respect for personified Society, by reverence for the State." Now it is not necessary to dissent from these propositions, which admit of quite unobjectionable interpretation, but if we subjoin to each of them the interrogatory "Why?" we shall have to complain that we find no clear answer in Mr. Pearson's essay or in its companions. And this is not giving us a moral basis, though it may leave us with a very good platform. Mr. Pearson does in fact sketch very ably the moral platform of Socialism, but presents its planks as unsupported dogmas. No one is likely to suspect him, thorough-going sensationalist as he claims to be, of inability to indicate the foundation of these dogmas on the actual basis of morality, but we regret the absence of such an exposition, more especially since it, may rouse the ever-watchful nostril of some fellow-empiricist to a suspicion that he smells, in such a sentence as the following, some kind of transcendental rat. "Socialistic principles insist primarily on the *moral need* that each individual according to his powers should work for the community." Perfectly true, but when, under the title of a "moral basis," such phrases as "first duty," "reverence for the State," "moral need," are used, we cannot help remembering that to many they will, without the absent expla-

lower style himself "non-Anarchist." If the Socialist party had accepted this principle so universally as he seems to imply, we should be far nearer the day of true freedom than at present. -[ED.]

nation, merely recall the "stern daughter of the voice of God," or the "Categorical Imperative" of Kant.

The fact is that Socialism has no peculiar moral *basis*. It has a moral platform, or body of characteristic opinion as to what is good for the life of man, just as Judaism or Christianity had theirs; but its basis, or final criterion, of morals is not different from that of any other philosophy founded like itself "on the agnostic treatment of the supersensuous," which ignores, that is, theology and metaphysics. This bias, or final criterion, is individual desire, and nothing else.

To the sensationalist, as Mr. Pearson in another essay points out, the primary fact perceptible in the universe is motion. Out of this we separate the notions of matter and force, the latter an attribute of the former, and alone indicating its existence. We may follow in legitimate imagination the evolution of life through increasingly complex combinations of matter accompanied by increasing specialization in the nature of the forces manifested, through inorganic, vegetable, animal life, with no distinguishable boundary to check us, and their corresponding force-aspects of chemical energy, growth, the will to live, the desire of the individual recognized by his own understanding. It is the determination of the individual to live, and to live freely and fully, satisfying his own desire, that the empirical student of society recognizes as its ultimate and elementary fact. All association, all the institutions of society are and must ever be the product of the action of individuals seeking an avenue to the attainment of this freedom.

What Mr. Pearson calls the "Ethic of Renunciation" is an attempt to shirk the problem of freedom by the extinction of desire. This is a kind of death, and the peoples who have been capable of accepting such a philosophy (as in the form of Buddhism) are individually enslaved and nationally unprogressive until some new accession of life shall stir them to break its chain. It is because the north-western races of Europe, and their descendants in America, have been full-blooded and strong,

even to coarseness, that they have outstripped the more intellectual, but milder-tempered Hindu.

The history of conventional morality is the history of the habits which individuals have judged conducive to the ensurance of their life and of such freedom as they found they could attain. In primitive society-the mere packing of individuals like wolves-the individual was strengthened in his struggle for bare existence, the pressure of the world upon him was lightened, by cooperation, and he could conceive and seek the satisfaction of new desires. From that period onward, and ever more as society grew to be in more respects the guarantee of freedom to the individual, acts destructive of or harmful to society have been resented by the individuals composing it as endangering their own small portion of liberty and comfort. Such acts are indirectly suicidal for their doer, as destroying the conditions of his own freedom, and penal legislation is, in theory, aimed at making them directly suicidal by entailing immediate punishment. Class morality and class legislation, it may be observed, enjoin or condemn only those actions and habits which affect the liberty of the individuals of the class.

For many thousand years the individual from his birth was taught that morality consisted in obeying the laws and conventions which be found established in his society. These obligations were imposed by the will of the gods. Among the chief reasons of the amazing success and influence of the Christian religion were its assertions that god was not external to man, but incarnate in him, that god was love, and that regenerate man was freed from the law, and his morality entirely independent thereof. The plain meaning of these assertions, freed from its theological setting is of permanent truth and value. From observation and experience Socialists infer that when once the institutions of society have been so adjusted that the individual can get. without fighting for it, nourishment and maintenance for his body and the leisure necessary to emancipate his mind from ignorance and darkness, his secondary desires will be of

a kind which can only attain their satisfaction, or approach thereto, in a healthy and happy society, the desire of knowledge, the interests of social intercourse, the delight in literature, in art, in music, and generally enfolding these, the social instinct, love, the widest and most Insatiable of all the passions of the individual.

These desires we say, spring up, when the first conditions of freedom are attained. These desires have created the civilization and culture of the world, in spite of the class dominance and slavery still subsisting. Born into the tangle of our modern life, ignorant and weak and almost blind, the individual finds it laid upon him that he take up his manhood and go forward. If Society has shut him out from her workshops and her schools lie will join that supplementary "society" the so-called "criminal class." If he is endowed with health and can avail himself of the social machinery for his own instruction and maintenance, he will probably become a good citizen. Between these two fates lie those of the diseased, the weakly, the unlucky and those displaced by competition in industry, who are all liable to be driven into habits and actions accounted immoral. Socialists, recognizing that individual desire in a wholesome society will almost invariably find its highest satisfaction in social action, work to establish such conditions as shall remove from every child and every man the trammels of weakness and stupidity which now promote immoral actions.

"All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient." Only education in society can teach the individual what is most truly expedient for him. The Socialist "moral platform" will give him excellent rules for guidance in his non-age, but not until he acts socially for the satisfaction of his own individual desire, apart from any sense of duty or obligation, can he be in truth a free and moral agent. S.O.

*When our correspondent has dropped his opportunism and carried to its logical conclusion his belief in the self satisfaction of the individual as the basis of morals, we think he will no