

Last Letter

Josiah Warren

1874

Contents

I	3
II	3

As our readers have been already informed, Mr. Josiah Warren, the author of True Civilization and other unpretentious little works on social reform, died In Charlestown, Massachusetts, on the fourteenth of April, at the age of seventy-five years. Although he was confined to his chamber during most of the winter, his mind was as vigorous as ever; and he took great interest in the articles on his "cost principle" which have been published from time to time in The Index. On the eleventh of April, he wrote the first of the following papers; but, not being satisfied with it, he essayed without entire success to re-write it on the thirteenth, the very day before he died, even calling upon an attendant to steady his hand while writing. There is something exceedingly touching in this unquenchable enthusiasm for his idea manifested by the good old man, while the flame of life was flickering in its socket; and, notwithstanding the repetitions, it seems well to publish both drafts of his paper together, that his latest thought on the subject to which he had devoted his entire life may be preserved entire. Under these circumstances we refrain from making the comments that suggest themselves by way of rejoinder to his criticisms. —Ed

I

Mr. Abbot:—In The Index of the 5th of March, I see that, in treating of the "cost principle," you do not grasp the whole significance of it, but confine it to money, the compensation for labor, while we are continually reiterating that the word cost is used on account of its convenience to express sacrifices of all kinds, whether physical or mental.

Yon instance two men: one finds a brickbat, and the other picks up a diamond. You say that the cost principle requires that, the labor being the same, the one should exchange his diamond for the other's brickbat; entirely ignoring that the cost principle justifies him in demanding compensation, not only for the sacrifice of time and ease in picking up the jewel, but for the sacrifice made in parting with it.

You do great injustice to the subject, too, when you imply that the cost principle requires any one to buy anything (like the brickbat) that is of no value to him: you seem to think that, because one accepts a principle, he is bound to accept any absurd application that any one chooses to make of it, however it may be distorted. But the natural sovereignty of each person will take care of this.

I had thought of saying something about interest on money; but, as I approach the subject, I find it gathering such a cloud of childish sophisms to unravel, I can only laugh at them, and say we shall accomplish nothing, unless we make money what it ought to be; and if we do this, there will be nothing to be done in borrowing and lending money. Nothing to say about interest. Josiah Warren.

I am too sick to write plainly.

II

Mr. Abbot:—In The Index of the 5th of March, I see that, in treating of the "cost principle," you do not grasp the whole significance of it, but confine it within the limits of labor performed; while the word was selected and is continually explained to include the sacrifices of all kinds that we make in serving each other. For instance, the inventor spends his time and money, and perhaps sacrifices a few nights' sleep: and, for a convenient phraseology, we say his machine has cost

him time, money, and sleep. If this view of the word cost is borne in mind, the principle will not long be disputed, but will be acknowledged to be the basis of a new and successful civilization.

You instance two men: one picks up a brickbat, and the other a jewel; and you say that the cost principle requires that, the labor being the same, the one should exchange his jewel for the other's brickbat, entirely ignoring the fact that the cost principle justifies him in demanding compensation not only for the sacrifice of time and ease in getting possession of the jewel, but also for the sacrifice he makes in parting with it.

I don't know that I ought to be surprised at this misconception of the cost principle, since I have several times seen it announced as referring only to labor performed by the hands.

I may buy a house that I have particularly desired, and be willing to pay more for it than its labor cost. If I do this cheerfully, all is well; but when the owner stretches his demands beyond what he knows to be compensation for his labor and sacrifices, he has entered on cannibalism.

Here the manuscript abruptly ends; the tired hand, which at last found it impossible to execute the bidding of the tireless mind, rested from its toil forever. —Ed.

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