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Purposes and Consequences

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“Purposes and Consequences”[1]

By William Graham Sumner

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The observation that motives and purposes have nothing to do with consequences is a criterion for distinguishing between the science of society and the views, whims, ideals, and fads which are current in regard to social matters, but especially for distinguishing between socialism and sociology. Motives and purposes are in the brain and heart of man. Consequences are in the world of fact. The former are infected by human ignorance, folly, self-deception, and passion; the latter are sequences of cause and effect dependent upon the nature of the forces at work. When, therefore, a man acts, he sets forces in motion, and the consequences are such as those forces produce under the conditions existing. They are entirely independent of any notion, will, wish, or intention in the mind of any man or men. Consequences are facts in the world of experience. If one man discharges a gun at another and kills him, he may say afterwards that he “did not know that it was loaded.” He did not mean to kill. The consequences remain; they are such as follow from the structure of a gun, the nature of explosives, and the relative adjustment of the men and the things. Of course this proposition is so simple and obvious that no demonstration can add to it. Why is there any such thing as wisdom, unless there is a distinction between a correct and an incorrect apprehension of existing conditions and of the effects which certain forces will produce? How could anybody ever make a “mistake” if his purposes would determine the consequences of his acts? Why should we try to get experience of life and to know how to act under given circumstances, unless it is because the causes and effects will follow their own sequences and we, instead of controlling them by our mental operations, are sure to be affected by them in our interests and welfare? Why, in short, is there any need of education if things in this world will follow our motives and purposes—since education aims to inform us of the order of things in this world to which we are subject?

Since consequences are entirely independent of motives and purposes, ethics have no application to consequences. Ethics apply only to motives and purposes. This is why the whole fashion, which is now so popular and which most people think so noble, of mixing ethics into economics and politics, is utterly ignorant and mischievous. All policies are deliberate choices of series of acts; whether we wish good or ill, when we choose our acts, is of no importance. The only important thing is whether we know what the conditions are and what will be the effects of our acts. To act from notions, pious hopes, benevolent intentions, or ideals is sentimentalism, because the mental states and operations lack basis in truth and reality. Policies, therefore, which have not been tested by all the criteria which science provides are not to be discussed at all. Somebody’s notion that they would work well and give us a gain, or that there is great need of them, because he thinks he sees a great evil at present, are no grounds of action for sober-minded men. The protective tariff is a case, so far as it is a policy of prosperity. The silver policy

which was urged in 1896 and 1900 was another example. We live in the midst of a mass of illustrations of the fact that laws do not produce the consequences which the legislator intended. They give rise to other consequences, such, namely, as the forces which they set in operation, under the conditions which exist, necessarily produce.

Acts of the legislature work on the cupidity, envy, and ambition- of men; as soon as a law is passed each man affected by it takes his attitude to it. Mass phenomena result from the concurrent action of many. What results is what must result from the actions, acting as causes, under the conditions; if the actions are of a certain kind, institutions are undermined, men are miseducated, the public conscience is corrupted, false standards are set up; frivolity, idleness, love of pleasure, sycophancy, will become traits of the society. That the legislator intended to promote education, temperance, industry, and purity is entirely aside from the case. In 1899 the press of the United States constantly reiterated the assertion that the motives of the United States in the war with Spain were noble, humanitarian, and ethical, and that it never entered into expectation that the Philippine Islands were to come into our possession. All this was entirely idle; when a war is begun it will run its course and bring its consequences. What the intention was makes no difference. This, of course, is the reason why no serious statesman will enter upon a war if he can help it, or will ever engage in an adventurous policy, that is, a policy whose course and consequences are not open to his view so far as the utmost training and effort of human reason will enable him to see.

Whenever any policy is adopted, all the consequences of it must be accepted—those which are unwelcome as well as those which are welcome. This works both ways, for there are good consequences of an evil policy as well as bad consequences of a good policy. It is clear, however, that in the adoption of a policy the considerations which should be taken into account are those which are deduced from the conditions existing and from the relations of cause and effect in the world of experience. They are not ethical at all, and the introduction of ethical notions or dogmas can never do anything but obscure the study of the facts and relations which alone should occupy attention.

The explanation of the popular confusion between motives and consequences is easy. We men are daily compelled to act. We cannot desist from activity. Therefore we have to make decisions and go forward. Hence, in our judgment of each other, if the acts turn out to have evil consequences, we have to grant excuse and indulgence to each other, if the intention was honest and the motive pure. It is no doubt necessary and right so to do, but that does not affect the reality of the consequences or the suffering and loss attendant upon them. Therefore we turn back to our educational operations, and to science, in order to learn more about the world of fact and the play of forces in it, for what we want is, not to judge or excuse each other, but to avoid suffering and loss.

Here, then, is the great gulf between all the sentimental, ethical, humanitarian, and benevolent views about social matters and the scientific view of the same. The former start out from some mental states or emotions produced by impressions from occurrences; the latter starts out from the desire to know the truth about facts and relations in the world of experience. In all the dictionaries definitions of socialism are given which try to express the sense of socialism in terms of the pious hope or benevolent intention by which socialists claim to be animated. All these definitions appear to be colored by a desire on the part of the persons who made them to give definitions which would be satisfactory to socialists. The definitions are substantially alike. Not one of them contains an idea; that is to say, not one of them expresses a true definition, if by a definition is understood the expression in language of a single complete and well-rounded concept. An aspiration for better things is common to all philosophies and systems; it is not a definition of any one. It is a diffused sentiment and nothing more. These definitions, however, are all true to the reality of the case in one respect; they are all attempts to bring within the compass of a formula what is really a nebulous state of mind with respect to the phenomena of human society. The only positive characteristic of this state of mind is that it is one of disapproval and dislike. The suggestion of contrast with some other phenomena which would be approved and liked is, of course, a dispersion of thought to the infinite variety of subjective phantasms which might float in the imagination of an indefinite number of men. The point is, for the present purpose, that all this belongs on the side of motives, purposes, hopes, intentions, ideals, and has nothing to do with realities, forces,

laws, consequences, facts, conditions, relations. The science of society finds its field in exploring the latter; it has nothing at all to do with the former. This is why it is true, although socialists are annoyed by the assertion, that socialism is not a subject for discussion by serious students of the science of society. An economist or sociologist who discusses socialism is like a physicist who discusses Jules Verne's novels. He does not prove his own breadth of mind; he proves that he does not understand the domain of his own vocation.

Poetry and other forms of the fine arts express sentiments, states of mind, and emotional reactions on experience. As new stimuli they affect the imagination and produce new states of thought and emotion. For the greatest part their effect is dissipated and exhausted in these subjective experiences, not without residual effect on character. As motives of action, these impulses of the emotions produced by artistic devices do not stand in good repute in the experience of mankind. Why? Because they contain no knowledge or foresight, and therefore no guarantee of consequences. It belongs to education to train men and women to criticize and withstand impulses of this class. Pictures of scenes or objects, instead of inciting to action, ought to act upon an educated person as warnings to distrust the influence to which he is exposed. It is not possible to cross-examine a picture, even if it is a photograph.

A good education would, in a similar manner, teach its pupils to resist the magnetism of a crowd and the seductions of popularity. When a crowd, of which one is a member, are enthused with a common sentiment and purpose, it is impossible to resist the influence of it. Hence the well-known fact that men who act in a crowd often look back later in astonishment at their own actions; they cannot understand how they came to participate in the things which were done. Education ought to train us so that when we are in a crowd which is being swept away by a motive, we should refuse to join, and should instead go away to think over the probable consequences. In like manner popularity, which seems now to be the grand standard of action, is always to be distrusted. "Woe unto you when all men speak well of you." That is the time to take warning that you are probably going astray. It is very smooth and easy to run with the current and it involves no responsibility for the consequences. Who then will consider the consequences? They will come. All our reason, study, science, and education are turned to scorn and ridicule if popularity is a proper and adequate motive of action.

In fact the judgment of probable consequences is the only real and sound ground of action. It is because men have been ignorant of the probable consequences, or have disregarded them, that human history presents such a picture of the devastation and waste of human energy and of the wreck of human hopes. If there is any salvation for the human race from woe and misery it is in knowledge and in training to use knowledge. Every investigation of the world in which we live is an enlargement of our power to judge of probable consequences when cases arise in which we shall be compelled to act. The difference between motives and consequences, therefore, is seen to be a gulf between the most divergent notions of human life and of the way to deal with its problems. It is most essential that all of us who believe in the scientific view of life and its problems should extricate ourselves completely from the trammels of the sentimental view, and should understand the antagonism between them, for the sentimental view has prevailed in the past and we live now in a confusion between the two.

It is a still more positive vice to act from an intention to attain ideals. Ideals are necessarily phantasms. They have no basis in fact. Generally ideals are formed under the stress of difficulty along the hard road of positive endeavor. Then the imagination takes wing and, disregarding conditions and forces, revels in constructions which are not limited by anything.[2] The ideal for mankind would be to have material supplies without limit and without labor and to reproduce without care or responsibility. Minor ideals are but details or fractions which are not worth attention. If ideals have any power or value, it is as easy to use them for the whole as for any part. Dogmatic ideals like perfect liberty, justice, or equality, especially if economic and not political liberty, justice, and equality are meant, can never furnish rational or scientific motives of action or starting-points for rational effort. They never can enter into scientific thinking since they admit of no analysis and can be tested by no canons of truth. They have no footing in reality. Anybody who says that "we want to build a republic of educated labor" is not defining a rational program of action. He is only manufacturing turgid phrases. He who says that the state "ought to balance the motives of interest and benevolence' [2] is not contributing to any sober discussion.

He is talking nonsense, since an analysis of “state,” “interest,” and “benevolence” would cause the proposition to fall into contradictions and absurdities. The vice and fallacy of this way of looking at things is that it assumes that men can by thinking things call them into being; or that men can add by thinking to the existing conditions some element which is not in them.[3] All who talk about the “power of ideas” are more or less under this fallacy. It is a relic of the sympathetic magic of savage men. Serious study of human society shows us that we can never do anything but use and develop the opportunities which are offered to us by the conditions and conjunctures of the moment.Other motives of action are derived from the authoritative or dogmatic precepts of some sect of philosophy or religion. These are what is commonly called ethics. In the ordinary course of life it is best and is necessary that for most of us, and for all of us most of the time, these current rules of action which are traditional and accepted in our society should be adopted and obeyed. This is true, however, only because it is impossible for nearly all of us to investigate for ourselves and win personal convictions, and it is impossible for any of us to do so except in a few special matters. Nevertheless, all this sets out only in so much clearer light the pre-eminent value of science, because science extends, over the whole domain of human experience, a gradually wider and wider perception of those relations of man to earth and man to man on which human welfare depends. Science is investigation of facts by sound methods, and deduction of inferences by sound processes. The further it goes the more it enlightens us as to consequences which must ensue if acts are executed by which things and men are brought into the relations which science has elucidated. At the present moment civilized society stands at a point in the development of the applications of science to human interests, at which the thing of the highest importance is the subjection of societal phenomena to scientific investigation, together with the elimination of metaphysics from this entire domain.

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[1] [*Note omitted*]

[2] Gumplowics, L., Staatsidee, p. 133; Soziologie und Politik, p. 110.

[3] Ratsenhofer, G.. Die Soziologische Erkenntnis, p. 365.
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