

LETTER TO A FRENCHMAN

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You ask me why manual labour presents itself to us as one of the inevitable conditions of true happiness ?

Is it necessary to deprive ourselves of mental activity in the sphere of science and art, which to us seems incompatible with manual labour ?

To these questions I have answered as well as I could in my book entitled What Shall We Do Then ?

I have never looked upon manual labour as a fundamental principle, but as a most simple and natural application of moral principles, an application which presents itself first of all to every sincere man.

In our corrupt society (the society which is called civilized) we have to speak above all else of manual labour only because the chief defect up to the present time has been a tendency to free oneself from manual labour and to make use, without any mutual exchange, of the labour of the ignorant and dispossessed poor classes, who are in a state of slavery resembling the slavery of the ancient world.

The first sign of the sincerity of the men of our class, who profess Christian, philosophical, or humanitarian principles, is a striving to free themselves as much as possible from this injustice.

The simplest and handiest means for attaining this is manual labour, which begins by attending to one's own needs.

I will never believe in the sincerity of the philosophical and moral principles of a man who makes his chambermaid carry out his vessel.

The simplest and shortest rule of morality consists in making others serve one as little as possible, and in serving others as much as possible; in demanding as little as possible from others, and giving to others as much as possible.

This rule, which gives to our existence a rational meaning, and the good as its consequence, at the same time solves all the difficulties, including the one which presents itself to you. This rule points out the place which is to be occupied by mental activity, by science, by art. In following this rule, I am happy and satisfied only when in my activity I am unquestionably sure that it is useful to others. The gratification of those for whom I act is

already a surplus, a superabundance of happiness, on which I cannot count and which cannot influence me in the choice of my actions.

My firm conviction that what I do is not useless and not harmful, but good for others, – this conviction is the chief condition of my happiness. And it is this which makes a moral and sincere man involuntarily prefer manual labour to scientific and altruistic work.

In order that my labours as an author may be exploited, the work of printers is needed ; to carry out my symphony I need the work of musicians ; in order to carry out experiments I need the labours of those who make appliances and instruments for our cabinets ; for the picture which I am painting I need the men who prepare the paints and the canvas, – but at the same time the works which I produce may be useful to men, or they may be (as in the majority of cases they are) quite useless and even harmful.

How, then, can I busy myself with occupations the usefulness of which is very doubtful, and for which I have to put others into requisition, while about me, in front of me, there is an endless quantity of things which are all unquestionably more useful for others, and for the production of which I need nobody ? For example, to carry a burden for him who is fatigued from it ; to plough up the field of a sick farmer ; to dress a wound, and so forth, to say nothing of the thousands of things which surround us, for the production of which no external aid is needed, which give immediate satisfaction to those for whom they are produced ; in addition to these there is a vast number of acts of a different kind, such as, planting a tree, raising a calf, cleaning a well, – and all these acts are unquestionably useful, and a sincere man cannot help preferring them to occupations which demand the labour of others and which, at the same time, are of doubtful usefulness.

The calling of the prophet teacher is a high and noble one. But we know what the priests are who regard themselves as the only teachers, because they possess the possibility of compelling others to regard them as such. Not he is a prophet who receives the education and the culture of a prophet, but he who has the inner conviction that he is, must be, and cannot help but be that and nothing else.

This conviction is rarely met with, and can be proved only by the sacrifices which a man brings to his calling.

The same holds good in true science and true art. The violinist Lulli runs at the danger of his life from the kitchen to the garret, in order to play on his violin, and by this sacrifice he proves the sincerity of his calling. But for a student of the conservatory, a university student, whose only duty consists in learning what is being taught, it is impossible to prove the truth of his calling. They only make use of the condition which presents itself to them as advantageous.

Manual labour is a duty and happiness for all men; the activity of the mind and imagination is an exclusive activity : it becomes a duty and happiness for those only who are called to it. A calling may be discovered and proved only by a sacrifice, which the scholar or the artist makes of his rest and comfort, in order to devote himself to his calling. A man who continues to fulfil his obligations of sustaining his life by the work of his hands, and who, in spite of this, deprives himself of hours of rest and sleep, in order to create in the sphere of the mind and the imagination, thus proves his calling and creates in his sphere what is necessary for men. But he who rids himself of universal moral obligations and under the pretext of a special infatuation for art or for science, arranges for himself the life of a drone, creates only false science and false art.

The fruits of true science and true art are the fruits of sacrifice, and not the fruits of certain material prerogatives.

But what will then become of art and of science ?

How often I hear this question from people who are not at all interested in science or in art, and who have not the slightest conception of what science and art are ! One would think that these people have near at heart the good of humanity, and that it, according to their conviction, cannot be obtained in any other way than by the evolution of what they call science and art.

But what a strange phenomenon this is, that men defend the usefulness of what is useful !

Is it possible there can be men so senseless as to deny the usefulness of what is useful ? And is it possible there are still more ridiculous people who regard it as their duty to defend the usefulness of what is useful ?

There are artisans, and there are farmers, and no one has ever had the courage to deny their usefulness; and never will a labourer stop to prove the usefulness of his labour. He produces, and his product is indispensable and good for others. People make use of it, and no one doubts its usefulness; and still less does one stop to prove it. The workmen of art and of science are in the same situation. Why, then, are there found people who make an effort to prove their usefulness ?

The reason is this, that the true workers of science and of art do not secure any rights to themselves : they give the products of their labours, these products are useful, and they are in no need of rights and of their confirmation. But the vast majority of those who consider themselves savants and artists know full well that what they produce is not worth what they use up, and so they have recourse to all kinds of means, like the priests of all times and of all nations, in order to prove that their activity is indispensable for the good of humanity.

True science and true art have always existed, and will always exist, like all other branches of human activities, and it is impossible and useless to deny or defend them.

The false position which science and art occupy in our society proves only that the people who call themselves civilized, with the savants and the artists at their head, form a caste with all the prophets who are inherent in each caste. They debase and minimize the principle in the name of which a caste is formed. Instead of the true religion they preach a false one ; instead of the true science they produce a false one. The same is true of art. They lie as a heavy burden on the people, and besides deprive the people of the light, in vain trying to show that they are disseminating it. And, what is worst of all, their acts always contradict the principles which they profess.

Without considering those who maintain the untenable principle of science for science's sake, and of art for art's sake, they are all obliged to prove that science and art are indispensable, because they serve the good of humanity.

But wherein does this good consist ?

By what signs can the good be told from the evil ?

The adherents of science and of art obviate this question. They even assume that the determination of the good is not possible and is standing outside of science and outside of art. The good in general, they say, what is good and beautiful, cannot be defined.

But they are lying !

At all times, humanity, in its forward movement, has been doing nothing but defining what is good and beautiful. Goodness and beauty were defined a thousand years ago ; but this definition does not suit them, the high priests : it discloses their emptiness and the harmfulness of what they call science and art, which is even contrary to goodness and beauty.

The Brahmins, the Buddhists, the Chinese sages, the Jews, the Egyptians, the Greek stoics, have defined the good in the simplest way. Everything which introduces union among men is goodness and beauty. Everything which disunites them is evil and ugliness. All men know this definition. It is imprinted in our hearts.

Goodness and beauty are for man that which unites men. And so, if the adherents of science and of art have indeed the good of humanity in view, they must move forward only those sciences which lead to that end. And if that were so, there would be no juridical, no military sciences, no political economy, the aim of which is the good of certain societies and the ruin of others. If the good were actually the aim of science and of the arts, the pretensions of the positive sciences, which frequently have no relation to the true good of humanity, would never have acquired such an inexplicable

importance ; the same may be said of the productions of art, which are only good for the excitation of corrupt old men and for the pastime of idle people.

Human wisdom does not at all consist in the quantity of knowledge which we may acquire. Wisdom does not

This is a condition sine qua non.

It is useless to speak with a man who accepts anything whatever on faith. If the field of thought is not completely free, a man may dispute and reflect for a long time and yet not advance an iota in the knowledge of truth. Every rational judgment will be shattered against the preconceived tenets which are based on faith alone.

There is a religious faith and a faith in the progress of humanity. They are precisely alike. A Catholic says to himself : " I may reflect, but only within the limits of Holy Writ and Tradition, which possess the truth in all its fulness and unchangeability."

The believer in civilization says : " My reflection stops before the two foundations of civilization, science and art."

" Our science," he says, " is the totality of the true knowledge of man ; if science does not yet possess the full truth, it will possess it in the future. Our art, together with the classical art, is the one true art."

The religious superstitions say : " Outside of man exists the thing in itself, as the Germans say, and that is the church."

The people of our society say : " Outside of man exists civilization in itself."

We can easily see the illogicalness in the religious superstitions, because we do not share them. But the religious believer, for example a Catholic, is fully convinced that there is no other truth but his. And it seems to him that the source of his truth is proved by disputation.

Similarly, when we are ourselves enmeshed in the false belief in our civilization, we are almost unable to see the illogicalness of our reflections, which are all directed toward the proof that of all times and nations there is only our time, only a few millions of people, inhabiting a peninsula called Europe, who are in possession of the true civilization, which consists in the true science and the true art.

In order to know the true meaning of life, which is so simple, there is no need of positive philosophy, nor of profound knowledge; all that is necessary is to have no prejudices.

We must arrive at the condition of a child or of Descartes, and we must say to ourselves : " I know nothing, believe nothing, and want

nothing but to find out the true meaning of life, which I must live."

The answer has been given since remote antiquity, and this answer is clear and simple.

My inner feeling tells me that I want the good and happiness for myself only.

Reason tells me : " All men, all beings, want the same."

All beings, which, like me, seek their personal happiness, will evidently crush me. And so I cannot find that happiness in the striving after which my life consists. The striving after happiness is my life, and reason shows me that this striving is useless, and that, therefore, I cannot live.

Simple reflection shows me that in that order of the world, where all beings strive only after their personal good, I, a being striving after the same, cannot get this good. And I cannot live !

But, in spite of such a clear reflection, we live and seek happiness and the good. We say to ourselves : " I could attain the good, be happy, if only all the other beings loved me more than themselves."

This is impossible ! But, in spite of it, we all live, and our whole activity, all our strivings after wealth, family, glory, power, – all that is only attempts at compelling other people to love me better than they love themselves.

Wealth, glory, power, give us the semblance of such a state, and we are satisfied : for a moment we forget that these are all illusions, and not reality.

All beings love themselves better than us, and happiness is impossible !

There are men (and their number is growing from day to day) who cannot solve this difficulty, and who kill themselves, saying that life is an empty and foolish jest.

And yet the solution of the problem is more than simple, and presents itself of its own accord.

I can be happy only in an order of the world in which all beings would love others more than themselves. The whole world would be happy, if its beings did not love themselves, but their like.

I am a being, a man, and reason gives me the law of the universal good, and I must follow this law of my reason – I must love others better than myself.

A man need but reflect thus, in order that life might suddenly present itself to him under an entirely different angle of vision

than before.

The beings destroy one another, but at the same time love and help one another. Life is not supported by the passion of destruction, but by the passion of mutuality, which in the language of our heart is called love.

In so far as I can see the evolution of the life of the world, I see in it the manifestation of nothing but this principle of mutual help. The whole of history is nothing but an ever clearer and clearer manifestation of this one principle of mutual concord of all beings.

The reflection is also confirmed by historical and by personal experience, but, independently of the reflection, man finds the most convincing proof of the justice of this reflection in his inner immediate feeling.

The highest good known to man, the condition of the fullest freedom and happiness, is a condition of renunciation and love. Reason discloses to man the one possible path to happiness, and feeling directs man along this path.

If the ideas which I have tried to communicate to you seem obscure to you, do not judge them too severely. I hope that some day you will read them in a clearer and simpler exposition.

I only wanted to give an idea of my views of life.