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**THE VALUE OF
VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY**

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THE VALUE OF VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

I. INTRODUCTION AND DEFINITION

Voluntary simplicity of living has been advocated and practiced by the founders of most of the great religions: Buddha, Lao Tse, Moses and Mohammed,—also by many saints and wise men such as St. Francis, John Woolman, the Hindu rishis, the Hebrew prophets, the Moslem sufis; by many artists and scientists; and by such great modern leaders as Lenin and Gandhi. It has been followed also by members of military armies and monastic orders,—organizations which have had great and prolonged influence on the world. Simplicity has always been one of the testimonies of the Mennonites and of the Society of Friends.

Clearly, then, there is or has been some vitally important element in this observance. But the vast quantities of things given to us by modern mass production and commerce, the developments of science and the complexities of existence in modern industrialized countries have raised widespread doubts as to the validity of this practice and principle. Our present "mental climate" is not favorable either to a clear understanding of the value of simplicity or to its practice. Simplicity seems to be a foible of saints and occasional geniuses, but not something for the rest of us.

What about it?

Before going further, let us get a somewhat clearer idea of what we are discussing. We are not here considering asceticism in the sense of a suppression of instincts. What we mean by voluntary simplicity is not so austere and rigid. Simplicity is a relative matter, depending on climate, customs, culture, the character of the individual. For example, in India, except for those who are trying to imitate Westerners, everyone, wealthy as well as poor, sits on the floor, and there are no chairs. A large number of Americans, poor as well as rich, think they have to own a motor car, and many others consider a telephone exceedingly important. A person in a certain rank of society considers it necessary to have several kinds of shoes, of hats or other articles of clothing for purposes other than cleanliness or comfortable temperature. What is simplicity for an American would be far from simple to a Chinese peasant.

Voluntary simplicity involves both inner and outer condition. It means singleness of purpose, sincerity and honesty within, as well as avoidance of exterior clutter, of many possessions irrelevant to the chief purpose of life. It means an ordering and guiding of our energy and our desires, a partial restraint in some directions in order to secure greater abundance of life in other directions. It involves a deliberate organization of life for a purpose. For example, the men who tried to climb Mount Everest concentrated their thoughts and energies on the planning of that expedition for several years, and in the actual attempt discarded every ounce of equipment not surely needed for that one purpose.

Of course, as different people have different purposes in life, what is relevant to the purpose of one person might not be relevant to the purpose of another. Yet it is easy to see that our individual lives and community life would be much changed if every one organized and graded and simplified his purposes so that one purpose would easily dominate all the others, and if each person then re-organized his outer life in accordance with this new arrangement of purposes,—discarding possessions and activities irrelevant to the main purpose. The degree of simplification is a matter for each individual to settle for himself, but the meaning of the principle is now perhaps clear enough for discussion, even though the applications of it may differ. I will not attempt more exact: definition at this point, trusting to the discussion to clarify further the meaning of the topic.

II. DOUBTS

Since an emphasis on simplicity seems nowadays to many people a mistake, let us consider their doubts before we go further.

First of all, modern machine production seems to have solved the age-old condition of scarcity of the material things needed for life. Science and invention, industrialism, commerce and transportation have made it possible to produce and distribute more and better food, clothing, housing materials, tools and equipment, comforts, and luxuries than mankind has ever had hitherto. For an American, a stroll through a ten-cent store, a chain-grocery store and a department store, followed by a perusal of a catalogue of some of the large mail-order stores, is convincing on that score, to say nothing of what meets our eye on every street. Henry Ford's idea that civilization progresses by the increase in the number of people's desires and their satisfaction looks sensible. The vast quantities of paper and ink devoted to advertisements add emphasis to that belief. The financial and social stability of every industrialized country seems to be founded on the expectation of an ever-expanding market for mass production. Russia, as well as capitalistic nations, has this aim. The whole world appears to be geared to this concept. Isn't it an anachronism to talk of simplicity in such an age? Is it not our duty to rise above and master the increasing complexity of life? Without irreverence, is not that what God has done in the creation and evolution of this universe?

Furthermore, to revert to simplicity would pretty surely mean for most people the re-assumption of a vast amount of drudgery which our modern complex appliances handle for us. Complex as our paraphernalia is, nevertheless, does it not protect us against famine, disease, and extremes of temperature? Do not our tractors, electric lights, gas stoves, water pipes, electric refrigerators, house heating, airplanes, steam and motor transport, telephones, lift us beyond the threshold of animal existence, remove from us oppressive fears, give us a sense of security and at least the possibility of leisure? We must surely have leisure if civilization is to advance.

Another doubt comes readily to the mind of every parent. We all want our children to have every advantage, to be healthier and stronger than we have been, to learn more than we did, to make fewer mistakes, to have better characters, to see more of the world, to be able to live fuller and richer lives, to have more power and beauty and joy. How can they in this day acquire the necessary training and education for this, how can they come into contact and association with many people and many beautiful and stimulating things and scenes if we, their parents, cramp our lives and theirs by resorting to simplicity? Do not even their bodies require a great variety of foods in order to be healthy? How is the mind to grow unless it is fed unceasingly from a wide variety of sources? Surely beauty is a most important element in the life of both individuals and communities, and how can we have beauty if we are limited by a drab, severe and monotonous simplicity of form, line, color, material, texture and tone?

Again, many people who doubt the validity of simplicity would say that if it were put into effect it would extend itself beyond the lives of individuals and claim application to group affairs. They would then naturally say, if many people "go simple," who is going to carry on the necessary complex work of the world? Governments, industries, and institutions have to be carried on and they are highly complex. Are these people who so greatly desire simplicity going to dodge their share in the complex tasks of society? In most organizations power is exercised over people. Is it right for some people to try to escape wielding that power? Who is to wield such power wisely if not those with a conscience? Is it not the duty of sensitive people to grasp power and direct its use as well as possible? Is this cry for simplicity only a camouflage for irresponsibility, for lack of courage or failure of energy?

These questions suggest that in this idea of simplicity there may be a danger to our community life. The existence of a large nation or a large city is nowadays inherently complex. To insist on simplicity and really put it into effect would seem to mean eventually destroying large organizations, and that means our present mode of community and national life.

So much for the doubts. Perhaps there are others, but these at least are weighty.

III. ANSWERS TO DOUBTS

Let us consider the first major doubt, to the effect that modern science and inventions have made possible a boundless supply of goods and foods of all sorts, so that the ages of scarcity and all the assumptions, thinking and morality based thereon are outmoded, including the idea of there being any value in simplicity.

Although, from an engineering point of view, technology has made it easily possible to supply all of mankind's material needs, this possibility is far from being an actuality. There is a very big "if" attached. Despite the wondrous mechanical, chemical and electrical inventions, scarcity of necessities still exists to a painful degree in every country. There are large portions of the population of the United States who do not have such comforts as water piped into the house or apartment, and furnaces to provide house warmth in winter. Yet this country is one of the wealthiest and most widely mechanized. Another failure in application of technology is shown by the vast numbers of unemployed in almost all countries,—probably more than ever before in the history of the world.

Our financial price system and debt structure controls production, distribution and the wherewithal to pay for consumption. That system operates to cause wheat to be burned in the United States while millions are starving in China: tons of oranges to be left to rot in California while children in our city slums are subject to rickets, bad teeth and other forms of ill health for the lack of vitamins in those oranges; and so on for a long chapter.^{1a}

The great advances in science and technology have not solved the moral problems of civilization. Those advances have altered the form of some of those problems, greatly increased others, dramatized some, and made others much more difficult of solution. The just distribution of material things is not merely a problem of technique or of organization. It is primarily a moral problem.

Quantitative measurement and the use of quantitative relationships are among the most powerful elements in science, technology and money. Because of this, the preponderating stimuli exerted by science, technology and money are on the quantitative rather than the qualitative aspects of life. The qualitative elements are cramped. But the essence of man's social life lies in qualitative rather than quantitative relationships: it is moral, not technological.

In volume III of Arnold J. Toynbee's great "Study of History"¹ he discusses the growth of civilizations. For some sixty pages he considers what constitutes growth of civilization, including in that term growth in wisdom as well as in stature. With immense learning he traces the developments of many civilizations,—Egyptian, Sumeric, Minoan, Hellenic, Syriac, Indic, Iranian, Chinese, Babylonian, Mayan, Japanese, etc. After spreading out the evidence, he comes to the conclusion that real growth of a civilization does not consist of increasing command over the physical environment, nor of increasing command over the human environment (i.e., over other nations or civilizations), but that it lies in what he calls "etherealization"; a development of intangible relationships. He points out that this process involves both a simplification of the apparatus of life and also a transfer of interest and energy from material things to a higher sphere. He follows Bergson in equating complexity with Matter and simplicity with Life.²

If this be so, it is time to call a halt on endless gadgeteering. We had better turn our attention to cultivating qualitative relationships and the ways of life which promote them. Our technology is overdeveloped. It rests on a moral foundation which had developed in a simpler world and was intended for simpler conditions. Our civilization is like a huge engine resting on too small and weak a foundation. Its vibrations are tearing the whole thing to pieces. In order to carry the load and strain we need to develop stronger self-control and group and individual morality.

To those who say that machinery and the apparatus of living are merely instruments and devices which are without moral nature in themselves, but which can be used for either good or evil, I would point out that we are all influenced by the tools and means which we use. Again and again in the lives of individuals and of nations we see that when certain means are used vigorously, thoroughly and for a long time, those means assume the character and influence of an end in themselves.³ We become obsessed by our tools. The strong quantitative elements in science, machinery and money, and in their products, tend to make the thinking and life of those who use them mechanistic and divided. The relationships which science, machinery and money create are mechanical rather than organic. Machinery and money give us more energy outwardly but they live upon and take away from us our inner energy.⁴

We think that our machinery and technology will save us time and give us more leisure, but really they make life more crowded and hurried.⁵ When I install in my house a telephone, I think it will save me all the time and energy of going to market every day, and much going about for making petty inquiries and minor errands to those with whom I have dealings. True, I do use it for those purposes, but I also immediately expand the circle of my frequent contacts, and that anticipated leisure time rapidly is filled by telephone calls to me or with engagements I make by the use of it. The motor car has the same effect upon our domestic life. We are all covering much bigger territory than formerly, but the expected access of leisure is conspicuous by its absence. Indeed, where the motor cars are very numerous, as on Fifth Avenue, New York, you can now, at many times during the day, walk faster than you can go in a taxi or bus.

The mechanized countries are not the countries noted for their leisure. Any traveller to the Orient can testify that the tempo of life there is far more leisurely than it is in the industrialized West. To a lesser degree, the place to find relative leisure in the United States is not in the highly mechanized cities, but in the country.

Moreover, we continually overlook the fact that our obsession with machinery spoils our inner poise and sense of values, without which the time spared from necessitous toil ceases to be leisure and becomes time without meaning, or with sinister meaning,—time to be "killed" by movies, radio or watching baseball games, or unemployment with its degradation of morale and personality.

Those who think that complexities of transportation, communication and finance have relieved the world from underfeeding and famine are mistaken. Probably their error comes from the fact that they belong to the comfortable and well-to-do groups among the powerful nations of the world. They have not understood, if indeed they have read, the statistics and reports of social and relief workers in regard to the extent of undernourishment in their own populations and in the rest of the world. They forget about the recurrent Chinese famines, so vast in extent. They have not examined the evidence indicating that famines in India in modern times probably have greatly exceeded in extent and perhaps in frequency those of centuries ago.

Those who shudder at the appalling loss of life by the Black Death in mediaeval Europe, forget the tens of millions killed by influenza during the World War. Those who point with pride at the statistics of the lowering incidence of contagious diseases often fail to mention the rising amount of degenerative organic diseases such as cancer, diabetes, kidney, heart and circulatory failures, and of insanity. So distinguished a physiologist as Alexis Carrel in his recent book, "Man the Unknown," has given evidence sufficient to startle and humble our pride in respect to the alleged "conquest of disease."⁶ He states that merely increasing the age to which people live tends to add to the number of aged people whom the young must support, and does not necessarily spell progress. He even believes that our modern techniques for comfort are doing our peoples grave biological harm by atrophying our adaptive mechanisms, to say nothing of the social evils created by industrialism.⁷

No,—the way to master the increasing complexity of life is not through more complexity. The way is to turn inward to that which unifies all,—not the intellect but the spirit, and then to devise and put into operation new forms and modes of economic and social life that will truly and vigorously express that spirit. As an aid to that and as a corrective to our feverish over-mechanization, simplicity is not outmoded but greatly needed.

Let me postpone for the time being the relation of simplicity to the education of children, for it is organically related to a subsequent part of the discussion and is better treated there.

There is a doubt whether simplicity is compatible with large organizations of any kind, so that insistence upon simplicity in that field would result in the destruction of large organizations upon which so much of our modern life depends. Correlated with this is a doubt whether the avoidance of exercising power over others, as part of an effort to attain simplicity, is not really a dodging of responsibility. As to these my belief is that our present world has too many occasions and opportunities for the exercise of power over other people. Our great executive organizations,—financial, manufacturing, commercial, and governmental,—are so large that it is impossible for their chief executive officers to know the full truth about what is happening to the people in them. If, for instance, there is trouble in a little Minnesota iron mining town controlled by the U. S. Steel Corporation, the President of the Corporation cannot find the essential

truth about it. He has not time to go there and look into it in person, and even if he did go, the people there would be so overawed by his position that they would be afraid to tell them all the details. If, instead, he writes to the local representative of the Steel Corporation in that town, that man, even assuming he is honest and fair-minded, will not tell the whole truth. He will not mention his own mistakes; he will not adversely criticise or "let down" his immediate subordinates because he relies on them to do what he thinks necessary. Nor will he criticise his superiors, because he depends on their favor for his job. All three of those people,—himself, his immediate subordinates and his superiors—are human and have therefore made mistakes. But none of those three sets of mistakes are going to get into that man's report to the President. Yet the President has to make an executive order based on that man's report. Hence it is practically impossible to have that order really just, because the facts needed for it cannot be obtained by the President who has to make it. When you add, as you must, an allowance for the average amount of selfishness, prejudice, pride, ignorance, stupidity, lack of imagination, ambition, jealousy, greed, and dishonesty, both in relation to the making of that report, the consideration of it by the President's assistants and advisers, and the administration of the President's order after it is made, the probabilities of injustice to the rank and file of workers and people on the periphery of that immense organization are greatly increased. Indeed, there is sure to be great and constant misunderstanding, injustice and consequent resentment and friction. That is true of all large executive organizations, no matter what their field of action. The larger they are the more certainly does this condition exist. Their very size makes them humanly inefficient, whether or not they are mechanically or financially efficient. Such a result is a matter of psychological necessity.

Hence we are unable to wield vast powers without probably doing more harm than good. There is too much concentration of power in the hands of too few people. I agree with Mr. Justice Brandeis that our organizations are too large for human efficiency. To say that only by the concentration of wealth can we attain great technical advances is not a valid argument, for already our technical development is out of proportion with the rest of our growth. If we want our civilization to last we must prevent megalomania and keep the different departments of our common life in harmony.⁸ We need to decentralize our economic, social and political life. If larger aggregations are desirable for some purposes, it should be possible to integrate the small units more loosely than at present, and for different functions. Such changes would give society greater security, not less. In view of the foregoing ideas and some others I doubt whether complete socialism is an effective answer.

Having discussed some of the major doubts, let us turn to the reasons for simplicity.

IV. ECONOMIC REASONS FOR SIMPLICITY

There are a number of reasons for voluntary simplicity of living, a considerable number, but perhaps not so many as to make the discussion of simplicity itself complex. If it seems complex, it is because so much intellectual clutter and underbrush has to be removed in order to see clearly.

Since our thinking today runs predominantly to economics, suppose we consider first the economic aspects of our subject.

Economics has at least three divisions: production, distribution and consumption. Of material goods we are not all producers or distributors, but we are all consumers. Simplicity of living affects primarily consumption. It sets a standard of consumption. Consumption is the area within which each individual can affect the economic life of the community. Small as his own share may be, that is the area within which every person can exercise his control over the forces of economic production and distribution. If he regards himself as responsible for our joint economic welfare, he has a duty to think out and decide upon and adhere to a standard of consumption for himself and his family. Shall he have only one hat or three, one or four pairs of shoes, a house with a separate dining room or have the meals either in the kitchen or sitting room? And so on. In this pamphlet I not attempt to set a standard for any one, for that is a matter which each must settle for himself. I am discussing only general principles, not specific applications.

The economic system in which we find ourselves is gravely defective in operation. Greed and competition are two of its harmful elements. Competitive ostentation,—“keeping up with the Joneses,”—is a prominent feature of modern social life.⁹ Simplicity of living acts as a deterrent to such ostentation and hence to both greed and competition. Therefore, all those who desire to reform the existing economic system can take an effective part by living simply and urging and encouraging others to do likewise. This thing comes close to all of us. Capitalism is no mere exterior organization of bankers and industrialists. It consists of a spirit and attitude and habitual actions in and among all of us. Even those who desire to reform or end it usually have within themselves certain of its attitudes and habits of mind and desire. If capitalism is to be reformed or ended, that change will alter the lives and thoughts and feelings of every one of us. Conversely, if I wish actively to participate in this transformation, I myself must begin to alter my own life in the desired direction. If I share too heavily in the regime I want to change, it becomes too difficult for me to disentangle myself, and I cease to become effective as a reformer. Those who live on income from investments will not dare to advocate deep economic changes, unless they live simply enough to permit a lowering of their income without too great an upset in their mode of life. My changes must be both inner and outer, and must, I believe, be in the direction of more simplicity.

I grant that such changes in my own life will be infinitesimal in comparison with the sum total of change required in all of society. Yet I have no right to criticise evil elsewhere unless and until I begin to remove it from my own life. And let no one forget that actions count more than words, that example is more powerful than exhortation, and that many, many repetitions of any small stimulus, such as one person's example, for a long period of time, create growth among all the people who receive the stimulus. One of the American Friends' Service Committee representatives in a broken-down coal mining town reports, for example, that his daily manual work in his little garden seemed to do more to create confidence in him among the suspicious and bitter unemployed people of the town than all his talk or other actions. If such simple action by me seems too tiny and insignificant to make it worth while to attempt, I should remember that it is not really insignificant, because it is an organic part of the great spirit of millions throughout the ages who have voluntarily lived simple lives. The meaning of my part in such a movement does not lie in the size of my accomplishment so far as I am aware of it, but in the quality of the principle and the quality of my participation.

Exploitation of human beings is an ancient evil, older than capitalism. It existed under European feudalism, and probably in most of the older forms of economic and social organization in every continent. It goes on today all around us, and practically everyone of us shares in it at least indirectly. The first step I can take to cut down my share in exploitation is to live simply. All luxuries require unnecessary labour, as John Woolman so clearly showed.¹⁰ The production and consumption of luxuries divert labor and capital from tasks which are socially more productive and beneficial; they often take land away from wise use; and they waste raw materials which might be used to better advantage. This tends to increase the prices of necessities and thereby lowers real wages and makes the struggle of the poor harder. Since poor people wish to imitate the rich, we see working girls on small wages buying furs, expensive shoes and cosmetics, and

depriving themselves of proper food and warm clothing in order to do so. In such a case the ostentatious luxury of the rich clearly is a factor in causing hardships and sickness, and resulting in unnecessary labor on the part of the poor, to repair those losses. The fashions in luxuries often change arbitrarily and suddenly, and such changes create unemployment. Those who work at luxury trades are, in time of economic depression, in the most insecure position of all, because then the spending for luxuries is the first thing to stop. Therefore the fewer people there are engaged in luxury trades, the more secure the population will be. Seemingly to "provide work" by buying luxuries operates to depress real wages for a much larger group and actively bolsters up the regime which steadily throws more and more men out of work, thus "giving" a little with one hand while taking away much more with the other.

There are certain elemental human needs which have to be met,—food, clothing and shelter. These vary according to climate, custom and development of civilization, yet in any one place certain minima of these must be met if life is to exist at all. And if life is to be vigorous, there must be a margin above the minima, so as to provide physiological reserves for endurance, resistance to disease, and sudden emergencies requiring unusual exertion; and to provide mental and moral reserves for the work of adaptation to changes and making progress in civilization.

Simplicities must not infringe upon the minimal needs of individuals, or upon even the wise surplus margins above those minima. But inasmuch as the desires of mankind are boundless, and we all tend to rationalize our desires, there is endless dispute as to how wide the surplus margin should be in order to be wise. A recent study by Professor E. L. Thorndike, of Columbia University, indicates that the actual American expenditures for food, clothing and housing are considerably larger than the actual necessities to sustain life.^{10a} He took from the United States census and similar reliable sources the total classified expenditures of the people of the United States. According to the press report he said, "By the aid of a consensus of psychologists, I have divided each item of our peoples' expenses among the wants to which it probably ministers, and then combined the results into a list of wants and the amounts paid for the satisfaction thereof. . . . The payments for sensory pleasures, security, approval of others, and the pleasures of companionship and sociability, including romance and courtship, are in each case close in magnitude to the amount paid for freedom from hunger. . . . We pay more for entertainment (including the intellectual pleasures and the sensory pleasures of sight, sound, taste and smell) than for protection against cold, heat, wet, animals, disease, criminals and other bad people, and pains." The fact that we spend annually seven hundred million dollars for cosmetics and beauty parlors, and in 1919 spent one billion dollars for candy; fifty million dollars for chewing gum; and two billion, one hundred and ten million dollars for cigars, cigarettes, tobacco and snuff adds pungency to Dr. Thorndike's observations. He continued, "Less than one-third of what we spent went for wants which must be satisfied to keep the human species alive and self-perpetuating. The rest went chiefly to keep us amused and comfortable, physically, intellectually, morally and especially socially." He analyzed our total expenditures for food thus:—"56 per cent to satisfy hunger; 15 per cent to gratify the pleasures of taste and smell; 10 per cent for the pleasures of companionship and social intercourse, including courtship; 3½ per cent for the approval of others, and smaller percentages for protection against disease and cold, enjoyment of the comfort of others and the pleasures of vision." Similarly in regard to expenditures for clothing, he believed that nearly half the total was for reasons other than mere bodily protection. The approval of others, self approval, pleasure of vision, courtship, and other elements are strong causes of expenditure for clothes.

In view of all this, it is clear that in our expenditures of money, while elemental necessities must be met, nevertheless there is above that line a wide realm for the application of the principle of simplicity.

A guiding principle for the limitation of property was suggested by Ruskin: "Possession is in use only, which for each man is sternly limited; so that such things and so much of them as he can use, are, indeed, well for him, or Wealth; and more of them, or any other things, are ill for him, or Illth."¹¹

We are told that there is a close relationship between economic and political factors in society. With that in mind, suppose we consider the possible political implications of simplicity.

V. SIMPLICITY AND POLITICAL INFLUENCE

It is interesting that three moderns with immense political influence, Lenin, Gandhi, and Kagawa, have led lives of extreme simplicity. Their simplicity has been a factor in their political power. Political power is based on the trust of the masses in the leader. By a life of great simplicity over a long period of time the leader demonstrates his unselfishness and sincerity,—two elements which tend to generate and maintain trust. The masses feel that such a leader will not "sell them out." By sharing to that extent in the circumstances of the great majority of people the leader keeps aware of their problems and keeps en rapport with them. By so acting he identifies them with himself, as well as himself with them, thus encouraging them to feel that they too, despite small material means, may become significant in the life of the community or nation. In spirit they feel closer to him and feel themselves enabled to share in his greatness, and thus their self-respect, their courage, their endurance and morale are enhanced. If an entire ruling group or intelligentsia were always to live simply, the moral unity, self-respect and endurance of the entire nation would be enhanced. If anyone wishes strong and enduring political power for a great cause, he will be wise to simplify his life greatly.

VI. SOCIAL ASPECTS OF SIMPLICITY

We come now to the social aspects of our subject. Havelock Ellis¹² states that St. Francis espoused poverty and simplicity in order to secure unrestricted contact with nature and with men. The free play of the individual soul in contact with nature and men, Francis instinctively felt, is joy and liberation." "It is in the simpler and elementary things that our life consists." Such unity with nature and men is something which our industrialized modern society is sorely lacking and which its individual members greatly crave, as indicated by the zest and release which they get from an occasional holiday in the country or at the seashore. Lack of unity between men is now widely prevalent.

To give a concrete instance of what I mean by unity and disunity, it would be consistent with a real awareness of human unity if I should invite into my house for a meal and a night's lodging a starving man who has knocked at my door. But if my rugs are so fine that I am afraid his dirty shoes may ruin them, I hesitate. If I have many valuable objects of art or much fine silverware, I also hesitate for fear he may pocket some of them or tell men who may later steal them from the house. If my furniture and hangings bespeak great wealth I mistrust him lest he hold me up; or perhaps if I am less suspicious and more courageous and more sensitively imaginative, I fear lest the contrast between his poverty and my abundance will make him secretly envious, or resentful, or bitter, or make him feel ill at ease. Or perhaps he is so very dirty that I fear he has vermin, and I am revolted by that thought and am so far from him humanly that I do not know how to deal with him humanely. In this case it is clear that my lack of simplicity acts as a barrier between him and me. The prolonged lack of simplicity of our whole society has increased the distance between his thoughts, feelings and ways, and mine, and so adds to the social barrier. That troubles me.

Or again, if I have much real and personal property and am interested in it, my time is very largely occupied in looking after it. I will not have much time for simple neighborliness. A selfish and aggressive neighbor may infringe on my boundaries so as to use some of my land next to his own. He would not have been so likely to do that if I had previously been truly friendly with him, had shared some of my garden produce with him and his family and had been kind to his children. So my failure to do the things which would have created good feeling and a sense of human unity in him has resulted in trouble between us. The lack of simplicity in my own life has engrossed too much of my time and energy and has been an effective cause in creating disunity.

There is another and more far-reaching social consideration involved in the practice of simplicity. We know that social changes are taking place rapidly and also that perhaps we may be moving toward great shifts in the location of social and political power in this and other countries. If there should be another world war there is no telling what may take place. George Soule, in his book, "The Coming American Revolution," states that, in the light of history, what creates a revolution is the rise of a new group into economic power. I wonder if the rise of a new group into moral power might not create a revolution of a profounder, more permanent, and more widely satisfying nature. The members of such a group could not rise into moral power, however, unless they shared their economic fortunes and risks as fully with the poor as the communists have done in Russia. Unless idealism or spiritual insight is expressed far more thoroughly in deeds than has been done hitherto, no such effective moral power will be generated. If such a rise of real moral power took place, a group which combined simplicity of living, disciplined nonviolence, and wise changes in economic and social practice, might attain sufficient moral influence to guide and mold a new nation. Simplicity would be no small element in its influence.

Indeed, if, as some people believe, we are at the beginning of a period of economic decline, it may well be that great simplicity of living is the main condition upon which the learned professions which require leisure will be permitted to exist. If so, the previous voluntary adoption of greater simplicity by the learned professions would count for their security and make the transition easier for them. Something of that is recognized in the age-old Hindu society in which the Brahmans,—the teachers, physicians, priests and other learned professions,—are morally bound to and predominantly actually do maintain lives of extreme simplicity as an essential element in their professional code, to which great respect is accorded.

VII. NON-VIOLENCE REQUIRES SIMPLICITY

For those who believe in non-violence, simplicity is essential. Many possessions involve violence in the form of police protection and law suits. The concentration of much property in one person's possession creates resentment and envy or a sense of inferiority among others who do not have it. Such feelings, after they have accumulated long enough, become the motives which some day find release in acts of mob violence. Hence, the possession of much property becomes inconsistent with principles of non-violence. Simplicity helps to prevent violence. Again, the non-violent person may some day become a conscientious objector and subject to punishment by governments,—possibly jail sentence. If he has habitually practiced simplicity he will not have so much to lose that it would weaken his stand, nor will he be too fearful of jail life. Also, unless he has habitually practiced simple living there will be in the minds of others a slight doubt as to the completeness of his sincerity and unselfishness. That doubt will hamper the persuasiveness of his gentle resistance and voluntary suffering when the time comes for non-violent resistance.

A lesser consideration is that in these days of rapid change, it is easier to adapt oneself if one is not much cumbered with things. Physical mobility in these days is an asset.

VIII. SIMPLICITY AND RELIGION

Besides these social or moral considerations there are religious implications in the matter of simplicity.

We are told by St. John that "If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us. . . . He that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. . . . Let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth." (I John 4:12, 16; 3:18.) Living simply seems to be an important element in this effort to manifest love and human unity, and hence, to live in accordance with Jesus' commands. Love is the sentiment which accompanies the realization of human unity. It expresses that unity and stimulates and helps to maintain it. We have seen in the case of St. Francis how simplicity aided in his attainment of unity with his fellow creatures. Likewise simplicity helps to express and aid love.

The greatest gulf in society is between the rich and the poor. The practice of simplicity by the well-to-do helps to bridge this gulf and may be therefore an expression of love. The rich young man was advised by Jesus to sell all his goods and give to the poor and thus simplify his life, in order to perfect his religious life. No doubt such an act would have resulted in more than simplification of the young man's life, but that would have been one of the results.

Hinduism and Buddhism have also emphasized the value of simplicity.

The anonymous author of "The Practice of Christianity"¹³ believes that tender-heartedness,—gentle kindness,—is the supreme virtue and the essence of Jesus' teachings. She shows that such virtues as sincerity, courage, loyalty, esprit de corps, obedience, self-denial and temperance are displayed in every unjust war, in all forms of political and economic repression, in religious persecution, and often indeed among criminals. They make a strong character but not necessarily a good character. Goodness is not merely an assemblage of other virtues. The essence of the sort of goodness which Jesus describes in his parables and sayings and illustrates by his life may be summed up, she says, in the phrase "tender-heartedness."

Tender-heartedness, together with great intelligence and strength of character, has in the cases of such leaders as Buddha, Jesus, St. Francis, George Fox, John Woolman and Gandhi, resulted in simplicity. Tender-heartedness seems to have been one of the elements which compelled those men to recognize human unity and to live in accordance with it and to share their property and lives with those who had need. Thus simplicity is, perhaps, a part of utter gentleness, and may be essential to those who would really practice religion.

The practice of simplicity means that you have decided to lay up your treasure in heaven rather than on earth; that your treasure will consist of intangibles rather than physical things; that it will not lie in the realm of material power; that you prefer to cultivate and amass the reality of human trust rather than its symbol, money. Practicing simplicity means not only that you have made this decision, but that you are doing one of the important parts of it, you are conforming with one of its essential preconditions, you are expressing your preference by actual conduct.

The heart of the problem of simplicity is spiritual and lies in inner detachment. But the inner state must be expressed by an outer act, in order to have sincerity, in order to prevent self-deception, in order to strengthen the inner attitude and in order to gain further insight for the next step. "By their fruits ye shall know them." "Not he that saith Lord, Lord, but he that doeth the will of my Father," is the truly religious person.

Christianity needs a means of implementing its ideals of human unity into a social program. While simplicity alone is only one element, it would seem to me to be one of the necessary elements in such a program. Simplicity would constitute part of a code of moral hygiene necessary for a healthy and vigorous spiritual life. The verse, "He that loseth his life shall find it," may mean, for one thing, that he that loseth his keen sense of separate individuality and acquireth a strong sense and practice of human unity shall find his truer and more enduring and richer life.

IX. SIMPLICITY AND PERSONALITY

It is often said that possessions are important because they enable the possessors thereby to enrich and enhance their personalities and characters. The claim is that by means of ownership the powers of self-direction and self-control inherent in personality become real. Property, they say, gives stability, security, independence, a real place in the larger life of the community, a feeling of responsibility, all of which are elements of vigorous personality.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the greatest characters, those who have influenced the largest numbers of people for the longest time, have been people with extremely few possessions. For example, Buddha, Jesus, Moses, Mohammed, Kagawa, Socrates, St. Francis, Confucius, Sun Yat Sen, Lenin, Gandhi, many scientists, inventors and artists. "The higher ranges of life where personality has fullest play and is most nearly free from the tyranny of circumstance, are precisely those where it depends least on possessions. . . . The higher we ascend among human types and the more intense personalities become, the more the importance of possessions dwindles."¹⁵

The reason for this is something that we usually fail to realize, namely that the essence of personality does not lie in its isolated individuality, its separateness from other people, its uniqueness, but in its basis of relationships with other personalities. It is a capacity for friendship, for fellowship, for intercourse, for entering imaginatively into the lives of others. At its height it is a capacity for and exercise of love.¹⁶ Friendship and love do not require ownership of property for either their ordinary or their finest expression. Creativeness does not depend on possession. Intangible relationships are more important to the individual and to society than property is. If a person by love and service wins people's trust, that trust will find expression in such forms as to preserve life and increase its happiness and beauty.

It is true that a certain kind of pleasure and satisfaction come from acquiring mastery over material things,—for example, learning to drive a motor car,—or from displaying ownership of things as a proof of power.¹⁷ But that sort of power and that sort of satisfaction are not so secure, so permanent, so deep, so characteristic of mental and moral maturity as are some others.

The most permanent, most secure and most satisfying sort of possession of things other than the materials needed for bodily life, lies not in physical control and power of exclusion but in intellectual, emotional and spiritual understanding and appreciation. This is especially clear in regard to beauty. He who appreciates and understands a song, a symphony, a painting, some sculpture or architecture gets more satisfaction than he who owns musical instruments or works of art. The world of nature and the museums afford ample scope for such spiritual possession. Such appreciation is what some economists call "psychic goods." Entering into the spirit which lies at the heart of things is what enriches and enlarges personality.

There is the simplicity of the fool and the simplicity of the wise man. The fool is simple because his mind and will are incapable of dealing with many things. The wise man is simple not for that reason but because he knows that all life, both individual and group, has a certain few essential strands or elements and outside of those are a vast multiplicity of other things. If the few essential strands are kept healthy and vigorous, the rest of the details develop almost automatically, like the bark and twigs and leaves of a tree. So the wise man confines most of his attention to the few essentials of life, and that constitutes his simplicity.

We cannot have deep and enduring satisfaction, happiness or joy unless we have self-respect. There is good reason to believe that self-respect is the basis for all higher morality.¹⁸ We cannot have self-respect unless our lives are an earnest attempt to express the finest and most enduring values which we are able to appreciate. That is to say, unless we come into close and right relationships with our fellow-men, with nature and with Truth (or God), we cannot achieve full self-respect. Or, as Rufus Jones puts it, we must keep our "honor before God."

Simplicity of living is, as we have seen, one of the conditions of reaching and maintaining these right relationships. Therefore simplicity is an important condition for permanent satisfaction with life. And inasmuch as national self-respect is a necessary condition for the maintenance of a nation or a civilization¹⁹ it would seem that widespread simplicity, as a cultural habit of an entire nation, would in the long run be essential for its civilization to endure. At any rate, in the two civilizations which have endured the longest, the Chinese and the East Indian, simplicity of living has been a marked

characteristic. The wealthy Indian rajahs, often considered so prominent a feature of India, are, most of them, not greatly respected in India. With but few exceptions they are not moral or intellectual leaders, and in politics they are all creatures of an alien government. True, the simplicity of living of the Indian masses has been largely the enforced simplicity of poverty. Nevertheless, among the real intellectual and moral leaders of India, the Brahmans and social reformers like Gandhi, voluntary simplicity has been and still is a definite and widely observed element of their code and custom. This is true also, I believe, of the leaders of China, the scholars.

Those by whom simplicity is dreaded because it spells lack of comfort, may be reminded that some voluntary suffering or discomfort is an inherent and necessary part of all creation, so that to avoid all voluntary suffering means the end of creative-ness. Refusal to create may result in loss of self-respect.

Simplicity is clearly a sign of a pure heart, i.e., a single purpose. Also, because environment has an undeniable influence on character, simplicity of living would help to stimulate and maintain such singleness of purpose.

X. SIMPLICITY A KIND OF PSYCHOLOGICAL HYGIENE

There is one further value to simplicity. It may be regarded as a mode of psychological hygiene. Just as eating too much is harmful to the body, even though the quality of all the food eaten is excellent, so it seems that there may be a limit to the number of things or the amount of property which a person may own and yet keep himself psychologically healthy. The possession of many things and of great wealth creates so many possible choices and decisions to be made every day that it becomes a nervous strain. Often the choices have to be narrow. The Russian physiologist, Pavlov, while doing experiments on conditioned reflexes with dogs, presented one dog with the necessity of making many choices involving fine discriminations, and the dog actually had a nervous breakdown and had to be sent away for six months' rest before he became normal again.²⁰ Subsequently, American psychologists, by similar methods, produced neuroses in sheep by requiring many repetitions of mere inhibition and action; and as inhibition is an element in all choices, they believe it was that element which may have caused the neurosis in Pavlov's dog.²¹ Of course, people are more highly organized than dogs and are easily able to weigh more possibilities and endure more inhibitions and make more choices and nice distinctions without strain, but nevertheless making decisions is work and can be overdone.

One effect of this upon the will, and hence upon success in life, was deftly stated by Confucius: "Here is a man whose desires are few. In some things he will not be able to maintain his resolution but they will be few.

"Here is a man whose desires are many. In some things he will be able to maintain his resolution but they will be few."

If a person lives among great possessions, they constitute an environment which influences him. His sensitiveness to certain important human relations is apt to become clogged and dulled, his imagination in regard to the subtle but important elements of personal relationships or in regard to lives in circumstances less fortunate than his own is apt to become less active and less keen. This is not always the result, but the exception is rare. When enlarged to inter-group relationships this tends to create social misunderstandings and friction.

The athlete, in order to win his contest, strips off the non-essentials of clothing, is careful of what he eats, simplifies his life in a number of ways. Great achievements of the mind, of the imagination, and of the will also require similar discriminations and disciplines.

Observance of simplicity is a recognition of the fact that everyone is greatly influenced by his surroundings and all their subtle implications. The power of environment modifies all living organisms. Therefore each person will be wise to select and create deliberately such an immediate environment of home things as will influence his character in the direction which he deems most important and such as will make it easier for him to live in the way that he believes wisest. Simplicity gives him a certain kind of freedom and clearness of vision.

XI. SIMPLICITY AND BEAUTY

The foregoing discussion has answered, I think, much of the second strong doubt which we mentioned near the beginning, the doubt that parents have as to the harm that simplicity might do to the minds and general cultural development of their children. In regard to aesthetics, simplicity should not connote ugliness. The most beautiful and restful room I ever entered was in a Japanese country inn, without any furniture or pictures or applied ornaments. Its beauty lay in its wonderful proportions and the soft colors of unpainted wood beams, paper walls and straw matting. There can be beauty in complexity but complexity is not the essence of beauty. Harmony of line, proportion and color are much more important. In a sense, simplicity is an important element in all great art, for it means the removal of all details that are irrelevant to a given purpose. It is one of the arts within the great art of life. And perhaps the mind can be guided best if its activities are always kept organically related to the most important purposes in life. Mahatma Gandhi believes that the great need of young people is not so much education of the head as education of the heart.

XII. A CAUTION

If simplicity of living is a valid principle, there is one important precaution and condition of its application. I can explain it best by something which Mahatma Gandhi said to me. We were talking about simple living and I said that it was easy for me to give up most things but that I had a greedy mind and wanted to keep my many books. He said, "Then don't give them up. As long as you derive inner help and comfort from anything, you should keep it. If you were to give it up in a mood of self-sacrifice or out of a stern sense of duty, you would continue to want it back, and that unsatisfied want would make trouble for you. Only give up a thing when you want some other condition so much that the thing no longer has any attraction for you, or when it seems to interfere with that which is more greatly desired." It is interesting to note that this advice agrees with modern Western psychology of wishes and suppressed desires. This also substantiates what we said near the beginning of our discussion, that the application of the principle of simplicity is for each person or each family to work out sincerely for themselves.

XIII. CULTIVATION OF SIMPLICITY

Inasmuch as the essence of the matter does not lie in externals but in inner attitude, let us discuss certain ways by which that attitude can be cultivated. Since simplicity means the supplanting of certain kinds of desires by other desires, the best aid in that process is directing the imagination toward the new desires. We must try, of course, to understand intellectually all the implications of the new desires, but further than that, make the imagination dwell upon them in spare moments, and just before going to sleep and just after awakening. Read books or articles dealing with them. Associate with people who have ideas similar to those which you wish to cultivate. Exercise your discrimination in the relative values of different modes of living, and in the little details that compose them. Practice the desired simplicity in small ways as well as the large. Provide as many small stimuli as possible for this line of thought and conduct. Inasmuch as competition and emulation, especially the variety known as "keeping up with the Joneses," lead to complexity of living, and inasmuch as competition is encouraged by a sense of diversity and exaggerated individualism, we will help ourselves toward simplicity by cultivating a strong and constant feeling of human unity. Try to cultivate the ability to work without attachment to the fruit of works.²² If you realize that the purpose of advertising is to stimulate your desires for material things, you will be wise to avoid reading many advertisements. At least exercise selection in so doing.

Other elements of character which will be desirable to cultivate for this purpose are: strength to resist the pressure of group opinion; ability to withstand misunderstanding, unfavorable comment, or ridicule; sensitiveness to intangible values and relationships more than to sense impressions; greater sensitiveness to moral beauty than to beauty perceptible by the physical senses; persistence, endurance and strength of will. If simplicity is a valuable thing, then to attain it we must pay a price. Estimate that price carefully against what you believe to be the value obtainable.

The religions which have had a characteristic specific body of custom and daily physical observances as an essential part of them have endured longer than other religions. I refer to Judaism and Hinduism. Part of their vitality seems to come from this intimate blending of idea and action, this expression of inner belief in routine details of everyday life. If this be so, and we want simplicity to be a vital, enduring part of our lives, we must express it in the detailed physical warp and woof of our lives. For example, we will be wise to express our ideal by observing simplicity and moderation in food. The kind of self-control that is developed in curbing one's appetite for quantities and delicacies of food is of great value as a foundation for self-control in regard to desires of possession. It may be, as the modern psychologists say, that intellectual skills are not transferable from one subject to another, so that the mastery of Latin does not help to a mastery of mathematics, but moral qualities which are cultivated in one sphere are usable in allied spheres. Gluttony and other forms of greed are not far apart.

Knowledge of diet will not only help control of food appetites, but it is essential in order to select food wisely so that we may be healthy while maintaining simplicity. This is especially true for mothers of growing children. Modern discoveries about vitamins, mineral content of foods, calories, food mixtures, sunshine and fresh air show that it is entirely possible to live simply and have an optimum of health.

For people in industrialized countries, discrimination will be needed in the selection of machinery for personal and home use. The amount of drudgery in household and other tasks depends partly upon the kinds and extent of complexity of living. Some machinery is truly labor saving with a minimum of harmful byproducts or remote effects. In our American mechanized environment it will take intelligence to change successfully from living a complex life to a simple life.

As Ruskin said,²³ "Three-fourths of the demands existing in the world are romantic: founded on visions, idealisms, hopes and affections; and the regulation of the purse is, in its essence, regulation of the imagination and the heart. . . . We need examples of people who, leaving to Heaven to decide whether they are to rise in the world, decide for themselves that they will be happy in it, and have resolved to seek—not greater wealth, but simpler pleasure, not higher fortune, but deeper felicity; making the first of possessions, self-possession."

XIV. INVOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

All that we have considered has to do with voluntary simplicity, for those who have enough resources to live in more or less complex fashion if they wish. What about the involuntary simplicity of the poor? Is that a good thing? Its compulsion creates frustration, a sense of inferiority, resentment and desire for the things denied to them. In so far as involuntary simplicity conduces to closeness with the healthy forces of Nature and to unity with fellow men, it would seem not wholly evil. The lives of the poor in cities, however, are not natural, but dependent on a highly artificial and complex environment which deprives them of sunshine, fresh air and food in its natural state. That environment also very frequently deprives them of normal human relationships and activities. The more voluntary simplicity is practiced by the privileged, the more will the advantages of simplicity become available to the underprivileged, for their enforced simplicity will to that extent feel to them less invidious, and their poverty perhaps may then be on the way to remedy.

XV. SIMPLICITY ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH

However important it may be, simplicity alone is not enough to secure a thoroughgoing and permanent advance in civilization. The relative failure of the Franciscan movement seems to be evidence in point.²⁴ In addition to the changes in consumption which widespread simplicity would bring about, it will be necessary also to develop great changes in the present modes of production. Decentralization of production would be one of these changes. The social effects of that would be far-reaching and profound. Many other great changes will be necessary, including a different control of large-scale production and of land, and changes in distribution and in money as an instrument and as a symbol.

Simplicity, to be more effective, must inform and be integrated with many aspects of life. It needs to become more social in purpose and method. It ought to be organically connected with a thoroughgoing program of non-violence as a method of persuasion to social change, and to be definitely a part of a constructive practical program for the economic security of the masses. That is too large a matter to be considered here. But no matter what changes take place in human affairs, the need for simplicity will always remain.

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FOOTNOTES

1a For other instances see "The Tragedy of Waste," by Stuart Chase, Macmillan; Chapter V of "Capitalism and Its Culture," by Jerome Davis.

1 Oxford University Press, 1934.

2 H. Bergson, "Two Aspects of Morals and Religion," H. Holt & Co.

3 "The Philosophy of 'As If'," by H. Vaihinger, p. XXX, Harcourt, Brace & Co., New York, also an address by John Dewey to the American Philosophical Association, January, 1935.

4 See the essay on St. Francis in "Affirmations," by Havelock Ellis. Houghton, Mifflin, Boston. Also Samuel Butler's "Erewhon," E. P. Dutton Co., New York. "What is European Civilization," by Wilhelm Haas, Oxford University Press, 1929.

5 "Social Decay and Regeneration," by R. Austin Freeman, Constable. London, 1921; "Men and Machines," by Stuart Chase pp. 350-335, Macmillan; Chapter VIII of "Technics and Civilization." by Lewis Mumford, Harcourt, Brace & Co., New York, 1934.

6 Alexis Carrel "Man the Unknown," Harper & Bros., pp. 114-116, 154, 155.

7 Ibid., pp. 233, 303, 304.

8 See "The Great Society," by Graham Wallas. Macmillan; "A Study of History," by Arnold Toynbee, Vol. III, Oxford University Press; "Technics and Civilization," by Lewis Mumford, Ch. VIII, Harcourt & Co., New York; "Capitalism and Its Culture," by Jerome Davis, Ch. IV: "The Modern Corporation and Private Property," by Berle and Means.

9 Thorstein Veblen, "Theory of the Leisure Class." Vanguard Press, New York.

10 "The Journal and Essays of John Woolman," ed. by Amelia M. Gummere, Macmillan, London, 1932.

10a Presidential address at St. Louis meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. See New York Times, Dec. 31, 1935.

11 Munera Pulveris, World Classics Library, Oxford University Press, and other editions.

12 In "Affirmations," by Havelock Ellis, Houghton. Mifflin, Boston.

13 Anonymous, published by Macmillan, London, 1923.

14 "Property: A Study in Social Psychology," by Ernest Beaglehole, Alien & Unwin, London, 1931.

15 "The Christian Attitude Toward Private Property." by Vida D. Scudder (a pamphlet), Morehouse Pub. Co., Milwaukee, Wis.; cf. also Chapter VI of "Our Economic Morality," by Harry F. Ward, Macmillan.

16 Essay on "Property and Personality," by Henry Scott Holland, in "Property, Its Duties and Rights," edited by Charles Gore, Bishop of Oxford, Macmillan, London, 1915.

17 "The Theory of the Leisure Class," by Thorstein Veblen, Vanguard Press.

18 See the psychologists, Wm. McDougal and A. G. Tansley, also R. V. Feldman's book, cited below. The loss of self-respect is one of the greatest harms wrought by unemployment.

19 "The Domain of Selfhood." by R. V. Feldman, p. 95, Alien & Unwin, London, 1934.

20 "See "Lectures on Conditioned Reflexes," by J. P. Pavlov, Oxford University Press; also Henry E. Garrett, "Great Experiments in Psychology," Century Co., New York, 1936.

21 "Experiments on Experimental Neurosis in Sheep," by O. D. Anderson and H. S. Liddell, 34 Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry, No. 2, p. 330.

22 See the Bhagavad Gita. There are several translations; that of Sir Edwin Arnold (The Song Celestial), Charles Johnson. Annie Besant, D. G. Muckerji, Arthur Ryder.

23 "Unto This Last," World's Classics Series, Oxford University Press, and other editions.

24 See "The Franciscan Adventure," by Vida D. Scudder, E. P. Dutton Co., New York, 1931; "The Romanticism of St. Francis," by Father Cuthbert, Longmans. Green, 1915.

For further reading see "Personal Economy and Social Reform," by H. G. Wood, Student Christian Movement, London, 1910; "Christianity and Economic Problems," by Kirby Page and others, Association Press, New York City, 1922; "Ventures in Simpler Living," by D. J. Fleming, International Missionary Council, New York City; "The Simple Life," by Charles Wagner; "The Faith and Practice of the Quakers." by Rufus M. Jones, Methuen, London, and Geo. H. Doran Co., New York; the Tao Teh King of Lao Tse; the passages on asceticism in "Varieties of Religious Experience," by William James, Longmans, Green; "Property: Its Duties and Rights," by Bishop Charles Gore and others, Macmillan, London, 1915; and the Sermon on the Mount.