

AN EXAMINATION OF A NOBLE SENTIMENT

A noble sentiment is a very noble thing when it is genuine. A soul which would not throb in response to a noble sentiment, if it were genuine, would prove that it was base and corrupt. On the other hand, a noble sentiment, if it is not genuine, is one of the most corrupting things in the world. The habit of entertaining bogus sentiments of a plausible sound, deprives both mind and heart of sterling sense and healthful emotion. It is no psychological enigma that Robespierre, who was a hero of the eighteenth-century *sensibilité*, should have administered the Reign of Terror. People who gush are often most impervious to real appeals, and to genuine emotion. It therefore seems that we must be on our guard against pretended noble sentiments, as against very dangerous pitfalls, and test them to see whether they are genuine or not.

The sentiment which I now propose to examine is this: that we ought to see to it that every one has an existence worthy of a human being, or to keep it in the form in which it is offered, a *menschenwürdiges Dasein*. It is not a matter of accident that it is stated in German. A noble sentiment often loses poetry and transcendental solemnity to such an extent, when translated into everyday English, that it might seem like begging the question of its truth and value to translate it.

The first question is: what is an existence worthy of a human being? The hod-carrier, who is earning a dollar a day, will say that it is what he could get for a dollar

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and a half; the mechanic at two dollars will say that it would cost three; a man whose income is a thousand dollars will say that it costs fifteen hundred. I once heard a man, whose salary was twelve thousand dollars, speak of five thousand a year as misery. A *menschenwürdiges Dasein*, therefore, at the first touch gives us the first evidence of something wrong. It sounds like a concrete and definite thing, but it is not such; a *menschenwürdiges Dasein* is the most shifting and slippery notion which the human mind can try to conceive. In general it is about fifty per cent more than each one of us is getting now, which would, for a time, mean happiness, prosperity, and welfare to us all. It is to be remembered, also, that most of the people who, not in their own opinion, but in that of their neighbors, have not a *menschenwürdiges Dasein* are those who do not like that kind of an existence or want it, but have turned their backs upon it, and are in fact rather more contented than any other class of people with their situation as they are now.

The next question is: for how many people must a *menschenwürdiges Dasein* be provided? The provision of such an existence is the first necessity which meets one of us when he comes to understand the world in which he lives, — that is, he has to earn his living,— for the exceptions, those who inherit a living, are so few that they may be disregarded by the rest of us on whom this proposed duty will fall. The task of earning a living is found, generally, to be a somewhat heavy one, chiefly for the reason, as shown in the former paragraph, that a man's definition of a decent living will not stay fixed long enough for him to realize it. As soon as he thinks that he sees his way to it he wants to marry; then he becomes responsible for the *menschenwürdiges Dasein* of a number of other persons. His whole energy, his

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whole life long, rarely suffices to do more than meet this obligation. Such is the fate of the man who tries to guarantee a *menschenwürdiges Dasein* to himself, his wife, and his children. But the man who is to be provided with such an existence, under the new arrangement proposed, will not have any such difficulty to contend with; he is to have a living secured to him by the state, or the social reformers, or somebody else. His wife and children will obviously have as good a claim to a *menschenwürdiges Dasein* as he; their support will therefore cause him no anxiety and no burden. Therefore this class of persons will increase with great rapidity. They are, of course, all those who have neglected or refused to win a *menschenwürdiges Dasein* for themselves; and whenever it is determined that somebody else shall give it to them, it is provided that their number shall multiply indefinitely and forever.

Furthermore, in all these propositions the fact is overlooked that no humanitarian proposition is valid unless it is applied to the whole human race. If I am bound to love my fellow-man, it is for reasons which apply to Laplanders and Hottentots just as much as to my neighbor across the street; our obligation to provide a *menschenwürdiges Dasein* is just as great toward Africans or Mongolians as towards Americans. It must certainly be as wide as all *Menschen*, that is, all human beings. There are millions of people on the globe whose mode of life, whose *Dasein*, is far below that of the most miserable wretch in the United States, never has been any better than it is, never will be any better as far ahead as anybody can see, and they cannot be said to be to blame for it. It is true that they do not know that they are badly off; they do not bother their heads about a *menschenwürdiges Dasein*. They do not work much and

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they are quite free from care — very much more so than the average American taxpayer. But, if we are to give a *menschenwürdiges Dasein* to those who have not got it, just because they have not got it (and no other reason is alleged in connection with the proposition before us), then the persons to whom I have referred have a very much stronger claim, for they are very much further away from it.

The next question is: what will be the effect on people of securing them a *menschenwürdiges Dasein*? Plainly it must be to pauperize them, that is, to take away all hope that they can ever win such an existence for themselves. If not, and if the proposition means only that we hope and strive to make our community as prosperous as possible, and to give everybody in it as good chances as possible, then that is just what we are trying to do now, to the best of our ability, and the proposal is only an impertinence; it interrupts and disturbs us without contributing anything to the matter in hand. Now it is one of the worst social errors to pauperize people; it demoralizes them through and through; it ruins their personal character and makes them socially harmful; it lowers their aims and makes sure that they will never have good ones; it corrupts their family life and makes sure that they will entail sordid and unworthy principles of action on their children. If any argument could be brought forward for an attempt to secure to every one an existence worthy of a man, it would be that, in that way, every one among us might be worthy to be a human being; but, whenever the attempt is made, the only result will be that those who get an existence worthy of a human being in that way are sure to be morally degraded below any admissible standard of human worth.

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The next question is: who is to secure the *menschenwürdiges Dasein* to the aforesaid persons? Evidently it can only be those who have already, no one knows by what struggles and self-denial, won it for themselves. This proposition, like all the others of the class to which it belongs, proposes to smite with new responsibilities, instead of rewards, the man who has done what every one ought to do. We are told what fine things would happen if every one of us would go and do something for the welfare of somebody else; but why not contemplate also the immense gain which would ensue if everybody would do something for himself? The latter is ever so much more reasonable than the former; for those who are now taking care of themselves have very little strength to spare, while those who are not now taking care of themselves might do a great deal more. The plan of securing to those who have not a *menschenwürdiges Dasein* that blessing, is a plan for leaving the latter at ease and putting more load on the former; to the society, therefore, it is doubly destructive, increasing its burdens and wasting its resources at the same time.

The next question is: what means are to be used to give a *menschenwürdiges Dasein* to everybody? To this there is no answer; we are left to conjecture. The most reasonable conjecture is that the proponents themselves do not know; they have not made up their minds; they have not really faced the question. A proposition to give everybody an existence worthy of a human being, without a specification of the measures by which it is proposed to do it, is like a proposition to make everybody handsome.

Our analysis has therefore shown that this noble sentiment is simply a bathos.