

‘Our Colossal Immorality’s’ Antidote

By Daniel De Leon

President Schurman,* in his address at the opening of the 37th year of Cornell University on “Our colossal immorality” as revealed by the insurance investigation, said:

“I believe that we need to go back to the old ground that a man’s life consists not in the attainment of this world’s possessions, but in the development of the best character and power that is in him.”

This is equivalent to a confession that the modern “ground” develops the worst in man. This confession is valuable, for other college presidents hold the contrary. But it is not enough. It gives no clue as to why this should be so and how it can well be otherwise. Men do not strive for “the world’s possessions,” that is, its land and capital, primarily to gratify their cupidity. They recognize that without them culture and life are impossible, and that slavery and ignorance would take their places. “The world’s possessions” are a means to an end, and that end is not an ignoble one. So recognizing the individual begins to accumulate a little of them. But he soon finds that in order to protect that little from the competition of the little of others, he must augment it, or “go down and out.” The more he strives in this direction, the more his fellows likewise strive. This process continues indefinitely. The fear of extinguishment, with all that that implies, leads to larger accumulations and concentrations of wealth, so that finally it must now be said that the more a man or a corporation possesses the more they must possess to protect themselves from

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economic destruction. A capitalist or a corporation must continually extend their ramifications in order to buttress up their “holdings” and prevent them from being ruined or confiscated by their competitors. For this purpose, they struggle for the control of the insurance companies, and create a state of affairs such as that now being deplored by the President Schurmans. Out of the competitive conditions described there has sprung a morale that turns the getting of “the world’s possessions” into the end, instead of the means, of life.

But fortunately for society, this process of vast wealth accumulation is not without its antidote. It has aided in the creation of industrial cooperation. The individual no longer works alone, thousands, yea, millions, are his coworkers. Not only are his productive powers thereby enhanced, but so also are theirs. Cooperation is producing an abundance for all by all, and making possible an existence for all in keeping with the best aspirations of man. Cooperation is demonstrating that a property career, in the modern sense, is not the aim of society, nor the end of life. Cooperation, in brief, is establishing the interdependence of society and leading the way to the social ownership of land and capital, under which “the best character and power” that is in man may develop as it should.

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*Jacob Gould Schurman (1854–1942) was professor of philosophy at Cornell University from 1886 to 1892 and president of that institution from 1892 until 1920. He wrote a number of books, among them *Kantian Ethics and the Ethics of Evolution* (1881) and *Why America is in the War* (1917).