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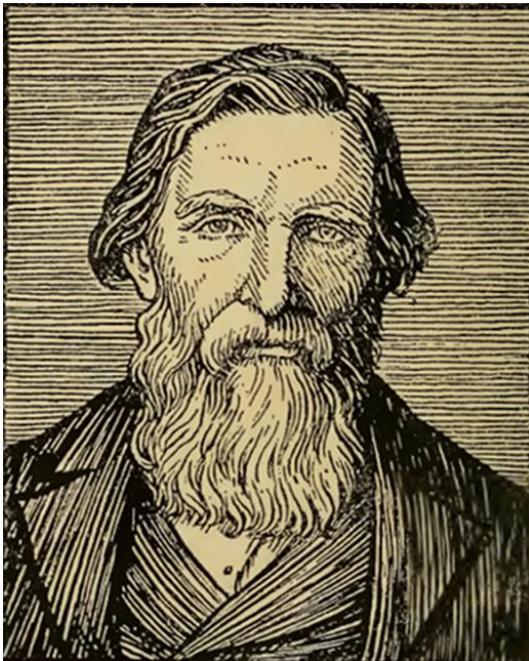
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Welcome to this QuikScan edition of

Unto This Last

by John Ruskin

*Four essays on economics and social justice
published in 1860*



John Ruskin (1819-1900) was one of the most remarkable voices of Victorian England. Having achieved acclaim as an art critic, Ruskin changed directions and by writing *Unto This Last* angered England's mercantile classes by fiercely condemning their greed and the poverty he saw

everywhere around him. He challenged the dehumanized economic thinking of his day and urged a new kind of economics based on social justice.

Ruskin became an embattled champion of the working class. While gradually succumbing to despair and insanity, he proposed a wide range of progressive social reforms and founded a utopian community, St. George's Guild, to put those ideas into practice. Many of Ruskin's ideas have now gained wide acceptance. Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and the British Socialist movement were deeply influenced by Ruskin.

Because Ruskin condemned the pollution of air, water, and soil caused by uncontrolled industrialism, he is regarded as one of the very first environmentalists.

Why a QuikScan edition?

Ruskin is a brilliant writer with a very lively prose style. Even so, *Unto This Last*, while brief, challenges even well-educated and motivated readers.

QuikScan is unique because it provides brief summaries throughout the book, making it much easier to understand and dramatically increasing retention. And, if a section of the book doesn't interest you, read *just* the summary and keep going. We hope to draw more people to this brilliant and important work and to provide a richer, more enjoyable reading experience.

This title is also the first in the growing library of QuikScanned texts. In addition, we invite you to create your own QuikScan texts either for print, PDF, or web-based reading. Visit QuikScan.org.

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About John Ruskin

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↑ **A quick look at John Ruskin's life** About Ruskin Sec

1

Ruskin achieved early acclaim as an art critic but gave it up for an embattled life as a social reformer. Frustration with the lack of social reform, a disastrous love life, and other problems led to gradual insanity.

He spent large sums of money funding projects, including a Utopian community.

He was one of the most important and influential Victorians.

▲1 John Ruskin (1819-1900) achieved early acclaim as an art critic but gave it up for an embattled life as a social reformer. ▲2 In later life he experienced mental breakdowns and eventual insanity due to his frustration with the lack of social reform in England, a disastrous marital and romantic life, loss of his religious faith, a legal dispute with James Abbott McNeill Whistler, and over-work. ▲3 He inherited and later earned large sums of money but willingly spent most of it on his social goals, including funding museums, an art school, and a utopian community, St. George's Guild. ▲4 He was one of the most interesting and most influential voices of the Victorian Age, and his ideas on social justice and environmentalism remain relevant today. He greatly influenced British political and social thought as well as Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Despite his ultra-conservative political outlook, he was a strong influence on the British socialist movement.

↑ **Ruskin's upbringing** About Ruskin Sec 2

1. Ruskin's father, a successful businessman, loved literature and art. His mother was intensely religious.
2. A very precocious child, Ruskin was accomplished in poetry, geology, and art—all before enrolling in Oxford.
3. He published the first volume of *Modern Painters* to defend E.M.W. Turner and became an acclaimed art critic.

▲1 Ruskin's father was a successful wine merchant of Scottish ancestry with a strong interest in literature and art. His mother was an intensely religious English Evangelical Protestant and a strict, demanding parent. She taught her young son to read the King James Bible, from beginning to end and to memorize large portions of it. Ruskin's thinking and writing strongly reflects this grounding in Christianity and Scripture.

▲2 Ruskin was an extremely precocious child. He enjoyed the best schooling and extensive travel with his father. By the time he enrolled in Oxford in 1836, he'd published poetry and several magazine articles on geology. He was also an accomplished representational artist from an early age, and his many drawings of natural scenes and buildings are exquisite. Ruskin's interest in geology—this was his first career plan—contributed to his fine eye for detail.

▲3 In 1843 Ruskin, only 24 years old, published the first volume of *Modern Painters*, a defense of the painter E.M.W. Turner, whom Ruskin's father collected and whom Ruskin knew personally. Turner was often attacked for not being true to nature. Ruskin argued, in highly expressive prose,

that Turner was in fact representing nature in a deeper way than those who painted nature with pictorial realism. Ruskin eventually wrote four volumes of *Modern Painters* and could have remained a highly acclaimed art critic.

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↑ **The connection between aesthetics, spirituality, culture, and morality** About Ruskin Sec 3

1. Ideas about society and morality increasingly found their way into his writing about art—and architecture.
2. “The Nature of Gothic” celebrates the stonemasons who worked on the cathedrals of Northern Europe because, Ruskin believed, they enjoyed artistic freedom.
3. Today when we prefer hand-crafted over machine-produced goods, we are drawing on Ruskin’s ideas.

▲1 For Ruskin, aesthetics were always tied to spirituality, culture and morality—probably a result of his deeply religious upbringing—and commentary on culture and morality increasingly found its way into his writing on art. Also, he developed an interest in architecture, an art form that (more than painting) focuses our attention on the workers who build the buildings and the ways of living that the buildings promote. ▲2 In a famous section, “The Nature of Gothic,” of his book *The Stones of Venice* (1851-31) Ruskin celebrates the stonemasons who crafted the gargoyles and other ornamentation on the cathedrals of Northern Europe because of what he perceived as the artistic freedom under which they worked. Ruskin, in other words, is focusing on the well-being of these craftsmen, and so argues that “servile” ornament, which requires human beings to work as though they were machines, is necessarily ugly. This argument about medieval craftsman extends into his fierce condemnation of division of labor and brutally repetitive factory work in his own day. ▲3 Today when we purchase hand-made pottery and other craft work in preference to products that have more “finish” due to their factory manufacture, we are drawing upon Ruskin’s thinking on aesthetics.

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↑ **The transition to social reformer** About Ruskin Sec 4

1. December 1860 marked Ruskin's full transition from art critic to social reformer: He published the first part of *Unto This Last*.
2. Ruskin's argument angered the business elites that had previous enjoyed Ruskin’s art criticism.
3. Not until the end of the 19th Century and beyond did Ruskin’s ideas take hold.
4. Ruskin is regarded as one of the very first environmentalists.
5. Ruskin’s politics, however, were ultra-conservative and paternalistic. He rejects social equality or the political demands by workers.

▲1 In December 1860, with the appearance of the first of four essays in *Cornhill Magazine*, Ruskin made the full transition from art critic to social reformer. These essays were published in book form in 1862 as *Unto This Last*. These essays are a fierce attack on unregulated (*laissez faire*) capitalism

and industrialism and the greed and cruelty of those who were in a position to alleviate the harsh conditions under which so many people worked and lived. They also challenge the era's orthodox theories of political economy (economics), which provided the justification for laissez faire capitalism.

▲2 Both the essay (and, later, the book) met a hostile reception from the wealthy business class that had enjoyed Ruskin's art criticism. ▲3 Slowly, over several decades, the importance of Ruskin's social criticism was widely recognized and his ideas began to influence public policy.

▲4 The passages in *Unto This Last* dealing with the pollution of air and water, people's need for green space, and the problem of sustainability show him to be one of the very first environmentalists.

▲5 Ruskin's thinking, however, will also strike modern readers as peculiar and backward. Although Ruskin called for social reform, his politics were ultra-conservative. Abhorring socialism and talk of social equality, he did not want the oppressed to demand justice. Rather, he called upon the industrial elites to become morally responsible and generous and to care for each of their employees as a father cares for his children.

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↑ **His disastrous marital and romantic life** About Ruskin Sec 5

1. Ruskin's marriage to Effie Gray was annulled when she filed suit for non-consummation.
2. Later Ruskin fell in love with a young girl who eventually went insane and died very young.
3. His disastrous love life surely contributed to his growing mental instability.

▲1 In 1848 Ruskin had married Effie Gray, a woman with connections to the Ruskin's family and whom Ruskin had known since she was twelve. In 1854 Effie Gray filed suit to annul the marriage on grounds of non-consummation (which Ruskin disputed). During the years of their marriage, however, Ruskin did not object when Effie enjoyed the friendship of men. After the annulment, Effie married the pre-Raphaelite painter John Everett Millais, to whose career Ruskin had given support. The couple eventually had eight children.

▲2 In 1858 Ruskin, who was then 38, began giving drawing lessons to 10-year-old Rose La Touche. Gradually he began to fall in love with her. While Ruskin hoped for an eventual marriage, the deeply religious La Touch family voiced objections because Ruskin had experienced a severe loss of faith in 1858. All hopes for marriage disintegrated as Rose lapsed into insanity. She died in 1875 at the age of 27th. ▲3 Clearly, then, Ruskin's marital and romantic life gave provided little comfort as he faced the antagonism following the publication of *Unto This Last*. Indeed, his disastrous love life surely contributed to his growing mental instability.

↑ His embattled years as a social reformer

About Ruskin Sec 6

1. In the 1860s and 70s, Ruskin wrote about art, offered ideas for educational reform, and, most of all, advocated measures for social reform.
2. Ruskin became Oxford's first art professor, funded a new college of art, and took the radical step of taking Oxford students off campus to repair roads.
3. During the 1870s, Ruskin established and funded a utopian community.
4. Ruskin's final 10 years were spent in seclusion and insanity. He died early in the year 1900.

▲ 1 In the 1860s and 70s, despite periodic attacks of depression, Ruskin maintained an intense schedule of speaking and writing. He wrote about art, offered ideas for educational reform, and, most of all, advocated measures that could bring about the social reform he was seeking.

▲ 2 Ruskin taught at Oxford as Oxford's first professor of art and, in addition, established, with his own funding, his own art college at Oxford. As an art professor, he broke all precedent by taking his aristocratic students off campus to repair roads. In 1878 he resigned his professorship in anger after he was sued successfully by the painter James McNeill Whistler for intemperate remarks Ruskin had made about Whistler's work.

▲ 3 During the 1870s, Ruskin established and funded St. George's Guild, a utopian community organized and governed according to principles of his devising. Ruskin always held to an idealized notion of the Feudal society in the Middle Ages—where, he thought, the high and low social classes were united in their concern for each other's well being.

▲ 4 Ruskin's final 10 years were spent in seclusion and insanity, and he died at 81, early in the year 1900, the beginning of a new century.



“Friend, I do thee no wrong. . . Go thy way. I will give unto this last even as to thee.”

About *Unto This Last*

SECTIONS

1. From art critic to social reformer
2. Ruskin’s four essays
3. His polemical strategy in *Unto This Last*
4. His errors and deeper insights
5. What Ruskin wants
6. *Unto This Last* as literature

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↑ **From art critic to social reformer** About UTL Sec 1

1. In 1860, John Ruskin was an acclaimed art critic. This was to change dramatically with the publication of four essays in *Cornhill Magazine*.

2. Victorian England was a land of poverty, urban decay, brutal working conditions, and ill health. Meanwhile manufacturers and merchants had become wealthy.
3. Always deeply moral, Ruskin had become appalled and outraged by what he saw around him. Social commentary had already become part of his art criticism.

▲1 John Ruskin stumbled into a career as an art critic as a very young man, by publishing a book (the first volume of *Modern Painters*) defending the work of the non-realistic painter J.M.W. Turner, whose work was collected by Ruskin's father and whom Ruskin knew personally. By 1860, Ruskin had completed numerous books, mostly wide-ranging interpretations of painting and architecture. He was highly acclaimed and in great demand as a public speaker. All this was to change with the publication, in 1860, of four essays articles on political economy (economics) and social reform in *Cornhill Magazine* (and in *Harper's Magazine* in New York) in 1860. In 1862, these essays were published in book form as *Unto This Last*.

▲2 England in the age of Queen Victoria had been transformed in hellish ways by the Industrial Revolution and unregulated capitalism. Large numbers of people lived in poverty, and ill health and performed brutally repetitious factory work under the worst of conditions. The cities of England were blighted by decaying neighborhoods. Factories filled the air with smoke and fumes and poured industrial discharges into the water. Amid this widespread suffering, manufacturers and merchants had become wealthy and had joined the older land-owning classes as the Victorian elite.

▲3 In large part because of his religious upbringing, Ruskin was always deeply concerned with right and wrong behavior, righteous and immoral ways of living, and the social conditions of the world around him. Also, he saw the natural world as the work of God, and as an art critic and artist, he believed that peoples' lives are diminished when they are surrounded by ugliness. Appalled and outraged by Victorian England, Ruskin had increasingly included social commentary in his writing on art.

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↑ **Ruskin's four essays** About UTL Sec 2

1. Ruskin angered his readers by condemning current business practices and the economic theory underlying these practices.
2. He offered an alternative vision of a better society in which workers are treated fairly, the importance of clean air, water, and soil was recognized, and warfare was rejected.
3. Ruskin had planned seven essays, but the hostile response he received caused *Cornhill Magazine* to end the series with the fourth.
4. Ruskin lived the rest of his life as an embattled, increasingly bitter social reformer. Gradually his ideas and, especially *Unto This Last* became very influential.

▲1 Ruskin angered the readers of *Cornhill Magazine* by condemning, in fierce and vivid language, the business practices of the mercantile and manufacturing classes and the economic theory that helped them justify their business practices. He challenged the orthodox ("classical") economic theory of Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, David Ricardo, and others.

▲2 He offered instead a compelling vision of a better society in which commerce was conducted justly, workers were treated fairly, people lived fulfilled, happy lives, war was recognized as evil,

and clean air, water, and soil were recognized as essential to human life and protected from industrialism.

▲3 Ruskin had planned seven essays, but the series was terminated with the fourth because of the hostile reception they were receiving. *Cornhill Magazine*, however, allowed Ruskin to make the fourth essay twice as long as the others, and so Ruskin incorporated content from the canceled essays into the fourth.

▲4 Ruskin lived the rest of his life as an embattled, increasingly bitter social reformer. *Unto This Last* was gradually recognized as very important social theory and one of the most powerful books of its time. Some of Ruskin's key ideas were recognized in later economic thinking and some of his radical ideas for reform have been widely adopted. Both Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and many others were greatly influenced by *Unto This Last*. Although this brief book is difficult reading, it is considered one of the most important literary works of Victorian England, and Ruskin's political and art theories remain important.)

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↑ **His polemical strategy in *Unto This Last*** About UTL Sec 3

1. Ruskin pugnaciously challenges the prevailing economic thinking of his day, declaring it utterly mistaken, immoral, and deeply destructive.
2. Orthodox theory supported laissez faire capitalism and represented human beings motivated only by the desire for financial gain.
3. Ruskin never bothers about data or statistics, yet he almost always argues from a stance of absolute certainty.
4. Ruskin redefines key economic terms from a humanistic and Christian perspective.

▲1 With pugnacious argument and satire, Ruskin challenged the orthodox ("classical") economic theory of Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, David Ricardo, and their followers. He declared that the economic thinking of his day was utterly mistaken, deeply immoral, and destructive in its influence. Ruskin readily acknowledges that he is only an amateur in the discipline of political economy but holds that political economy is so radically misconceived that no special expertise is necessary to refute it. Although Ruskin had experienced a crisis in his own Christian faith, he assumes in these essays a deeply religious stance and argues that the amoral nature of political economy should make it unacceptable to people who consider themselves Christians.

▲2 The foundation of Victorian economic theory was Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776. Broadly speaking, Smith advocated for laissez faire capitalism (letting the economy run with minimal interference) and celebrated the productivity possible with factory manufacturing. Smith's thinking had been further developed by other political economists, most importantly John Stuart Mill. Mill a contemporary of Ruskin, was a very important philosopher and social theorist, and, as the author of *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), the leading economic theorist of his day. David Ricardo further developed Mill's ideas and made important contributions to political economy. All these thinkers, in different ways and to different degrees, describe human beings as purely rational agents motivated by the desire for financial gain and exclude morality and empathetic human behavior from their descriptions of economic behavior. The economic philosophy of laissez faire capitalism, though it has changed over time, certainly has many strong advocates today.

▲3 Political economists as far back as Adam Smith (1776) provided data and statistics. Ruskin never bother, preferring to offer anecdotes and examples and to derive new meanings of word from their etymologies. Yet almost always argues from a stance of absolute certainty

▲4 Ruskin redefines key economic terms, such as “wealth,” “produce,” “capital,” “labor,” and “value” from a humanistic and Christian perspective. In so doing, he calls for moral regeneration and social reform. He urges the elite of Victorian England to think in terms of the betterment of the nation as a whole rather than their self-interest. His climactic pronouncement is that “There is no wealth but life.” That country is the richest, says Ruskin, which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings.

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↑ **His errors and deeper insights** About UTL Sec 4

1. In challenging orthodox political economy, Ruskin often represents the ideas of John Stuart Mill and others inaccurately.
2. For example, Mill's self-interested “economic man” is a concept; it doesn't represent Mill's own ethical outlook. Others, however, used this idea to justify self-interested business behavior.
3. Even when Ruskin is seriously in error, his ideas show insight and hold enduring relevance and value. For instance, national economies are not inherently a zero-sum game. But even so, the benefits of a productive economy are often distributed unfairly.
4. Ruskin is wrong when he uses artificially small groups of people to demonstrate abuses arising from highly inefficient markets. But abuse from highly inefficient markets does in fact take place.
5. What is disturbing in Ruskin's thinking is not his economics but rather his rejection of democracy, unionism, and workers’ right to fight for better lives.

▲1 In challenging orthodox political economy, Ruskin often represents the ideas of John Stuart Mill and others inaccurately (see [Fain](#)). Scholars have sought to determine where Ruskin truly misunderstood the ideas of the orthodox political economists and the extent to which he willfully simplified their ideas for his own polemical and satirical purposes. The practice of simplifying and distorting positions you are satirizing or arguing against has a long history.

▲2 The orthodox political economists varied considerably in their views and were could be ambiguous and inconsistent. For Mill, the self-interested “economic man” is a concept, a construct used for conceptual thinking—not a description of actual human behavior. Mill, in fact, is clear that ethical behavior and social justice are important. However, in the formulations of lesser economists and in the minds of many business owners and political leaders, the behavior of economic man was philosophically justified as part of Natural Law or accepted as inevitable human behavior. Ruskin is fair to Mill to the extent that he often acknowledges Mill’s ethical pronouncements but Ruskin insists these are inconsistent with his core ideas.

▲3 After a century and a half, the specific flaws in Ruskin’s arguments are not, I think, the prime consideration. Even when he is seriously in error, his ideas show insight and hold enduring relevance and value. For example, Ruskin regards economic activity as a “zero-sum game.” That is, for Ruskin a nation is always producing a limited amount of goods, and one person’s accumulation is another person’s want—unless men choose to become ethical and generous in their business dealings (and Ruskin, like other Victorians, assumes that the actors in public life are indeed male).

In fact, there are eras and nations in which the benefits of a strong economy are widely shared. But if Ruskin is wrong in his economic theory, there are nonetheless many eras—including our own—in which the benefits of a productive economy are not fairly distributed. In the United States the “wealth gap” in 2014 is the widest it has been in three decades ([Pew Research Center](#)). Many factors can contribute to this injustice, not least the ability wealthy individuals and corporations (whose shares are heavily owned by the wealthy) to influence government economic policy for their benefit. Often business interests and politicians deny that any such problem exists. Their view is that “a rising tide lifts all boats.” Ruskin, then, though his economic theory is faulty, staked out a compelling position on a crucial economic issue that is still being disputed today.

▲ 4 Another flaw in Ruskin's arguments is that he often argues from examples of business interactions among small groups of people—a master and his servants or a hypothetical community consisting of very few individuals. Within these unrealistic microcosms, Ruskin can easily show inequality and abuse due to highly inefficient markets. For example, the sole trader in a very isolated community holds back needed goods to impoverish two farmers—a situation that can't exist when there are numerous buyers and sellers. Even so, examples of this kind of abuse persist in our day, for example when a pharmaceutical company charges an exorbitant price for a drug because it is the only producer. Also, someone buying a home in a small town or neighborhood with little real estate activity offer a very low price if he or she knows that the homeowner must sell and has no other buyers. Many people regard such an offer as ethical, savvy behavior. When buying or selling, “business is business.” Ruskin says this is wrong.

▲ 5 The part of Ruskin's thinking that most people will find disturbing and least relevant to our age is not his errors in economic theory but his rejection of democracy and the right of workers fight to better their lives. Ruskin is the flipside of Karl Marx. His view of social organization and his politics stem from an idealized vision of the Feudal society in the Middle Ages—a time when, Ruskin thought, the high and low social classes were united in their concern for each other's well being. Ruskin's ideas continue to engage us, but there is no escaping the fact that he is both a forward- and backward-looking thinker.

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↑ **What Ruskin wants** About UTL Sec 5

1. Because of his hierarchical, paternalistic political outlook, Ruskin demands that the business elite improve the conditions of the lower classes out of moral responsibility.
2. Though no socialist, Ruskin proposes government intervention in regard to education, vocational training, and more.
3. Ruskin wants employers agree on rates of pay for each category of work and give workers more employment security than day labor.
4. Ruskin was a very early environmentalist who recognized how much human beings lose when they are denied sunlight, fresh air, and open meadows.
5. He makes clear his great abhorrence of war.
6. Ruskin wants political economists to focus much more on how well people live.

▲ 1 Because of his hierarchical, paternalistic political outlook, Ruskin demands that the business elite improve the conditions of the lower classes out of moral responsibility. He calls for merchants and industrialists treat their employees like a father would treat his children. Ruskin, however, is

not enthusiastic about charity, which he sees as an evasion of the underlying problem. Instead of individual acts of charity, he wants social justice built into the economic organization of society.

▲2 Ruskin is no socialist, and he does not envision a major role for government in the reformation of society. But he does propose certain kinds of government intervention. He believes fervently in high-quality, government-run schools and vocational training programs for the unemployed. He also believes that the working poor should be cared for by the government in their old age.

▲3 Ruskin wants to see employers agree on rates of pay for each category of work—rather than wages that fluctuate greatly from day to day according to the need for labor and the number of available workers. He believes that workers should not be hired as day laborers, uncertain about their next survival to the end of the week. Rather, they should instead have predictable employment.

▲4 Ruskin shows himself to be a very early environmentalist and an opponent of unregulated industrialism. He fervently believes that to degrade the natural world is to destroy the work of God. He recognized how much human beings lose when they are denied sunlight, fresh air, and open meadows.

▲5 While it is not a sustained theme in *Unto This Last*, Ruskin repeatedly makes clear his great abhorrence of war and his view that most wars fought in Europe are unjust and unnecessary. Often Ruskin points to weapons as the worst kind of manufactured goods.

▲6 Ruskin wants political economists to focus less on the acquisition of money and much more on what kinds of goods a country produces, how widely these goods are distributed to the population, and how well people them to use. Most of all, he sees the goal of a true science political economy and the true business of merchants and industrialists to create a nation of healthy, engaged workers who live fulfilled, happy lives. Famously, he declares “There is no wealth but life” and “That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings.”

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↑ ***Unto This Last* as Literature** About UTL Sec 6

1. Ruskin is a brilliant prose stylist with a rare gift for striking and memorable phrasing.
2. The prose style of *Unto This Last* mixes argument, satire, and deeply moving statements of his hopes for moral regeneration.
3. Ruskin very consciously wrote *Unto This Last* in a simpler style than his art criticism so that it could be more widely read. Even so, his complex prose is difficult for modern readers.
4. Ruskin also quotes scripture extensively and uses Biblical phrasing. He can write as an angry prophet.
5. Although the book's structure is eccentric, Ruskin, regarded *Unto This Last* as his best-written book.
6. *Unto This Last* is a masterpiece, but a deeply idiosyncratic masterpiece.

▲1 Ruskin has always been regarded as a brilliant (though uneven and sometimes exasperating) prose stylist with a rare gift for striking and memorable phrasing. Ruskin worked in diverse genres—poetry as well as prose—especially as a young man. Just out of Oxford, Ruskin wrote a moralistic “fairy tale” for the twelve-year-old Effie Gray, a family friend whom Ruskin later married. The fairy tale, *King of the Golden River*, became a classic of the Victorian era. During his career as an art critic, Ruskin was greatly appreciated for his “word pictures,” his ability to vividly and expressively describe natural scenes and the facades of buildings. As a social critic, Ruskin offered

insightful observations over a very wide range of topics. Lengthy books consisting of quotations from Ruskin's works have been extremely popular, and today there are many collections of Ruskin quotations on the Internet.

▲ 2 The prose style in *Unto This Last* is a complex and ever-shifting mixture of analytical argument, pugnacious verbal attacks, satire that can be either playful or bitter, provocative rhetorical questions, and earnest and deeply moving statements of his hopes for moral regeneration. The writing is extremely vivid, conversational, and theatrical. This must be due in part to Ruskin's endless letter-writing and his many public lectures. At times, the writhing energy of Ruskin's writing seems just barely under his control.

Ruskin is very willing to argue his positions using language that will startle and unsettle his readers. For example, in one of his lengthy footnotes, Ruskin offers a sharp, surprising response to an imaginary reader who complains that Ruskin's proposed social programs provide no way to deal with problem of "rogues." First Ruskin points out that Victorian England, "through its present system of political economy," "manufactures" its rogues in large numbers. In other words, Victorian England has become a *manufacturer* of rogues by tolerating the social conditions that make crime inevitable. Ruskin then concludes with a pithy answer to the complaint: "Let us reform our schools, and we shall find little reform needed in our prisons."

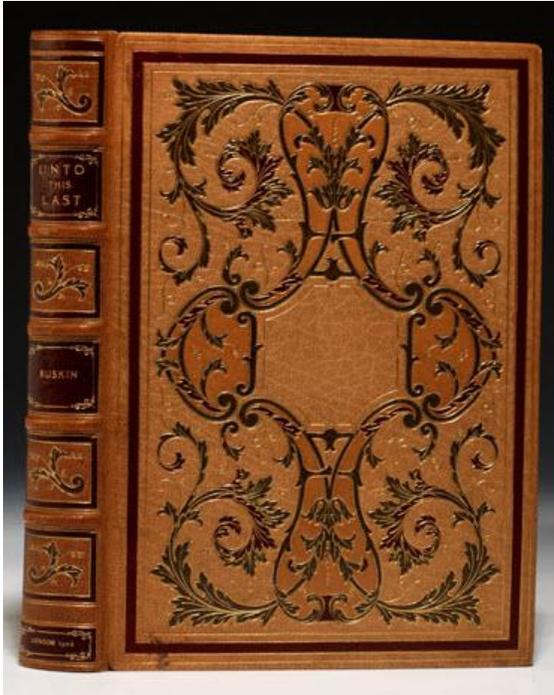
▲ 3 Ruskin very consciously wrote *Unto This Last* in a simpler style than his art criticism so that it could be more widely read. Even so, Ruskin's sentences are long and syntactically complex, with many embedded clauses that he uses to elaborate on his core idea. One consequence of his complex syntax, his analytical argument, and some stylistic eccentricities (taken from the writing style of Thomas Carlyle) is that Ruskin's prose demands very careful reading. Indeed, *Unto This Last* is very difficult for modern readers—which is one of my main reasons for preparing this QuikScan Views edition. Today few essay writers would dare make the cognitive demands on his or her readers that Ruskin does. It is sobering to realize that for many decades *Unto This Last* was assigned to the British equivalent of high school students. Now this book will challenge graduate students.

▲ 4 Ruskin is deeply steeped in the Bible, and—even though he lost his faith prior to 1860—he often argues from a Christian perspective and both quotes scripture and infuses his own sentences with phrases and echoes of Scripture. The scriptural references become much more frequent in the third and fourth essays, as Ruskin appears to us less often as a social critic pointing out problems and offering solutions and more often as an angry prophet.

Ruskin also quotes extensively from Greek and Roman authors (whom he read in their own language) and from Dante and Pope. He knows science and mathematics (he originally planned to be a geologist), and he willingly brings this knowledge to bear. In fact, he is a show-off in this regard.

▲ 5 The essays have a complex and perhaps eccentric structure. Because the fourth essay ("Ad Valorem") incorporates the planned essays canceled by *Cornhill Magazine*, we know that the book as a whole does not have an overall structure determined at the outset. On the other hand, Ruskin chose to make only the most minor changes when he published the essays as a book, and he regarded *Unto This Last* as his most important and best-written work.

▲ 6 With its powerful message, and moments of deep insight and with its brilliant, though extreme, prose style and not a few passages written with the resonance of poetry, *Unto This Last* is without doubt a masterpiece. Because Ruskin is both a visionary and is locked into the Medieval past and because of the book's many eccentricities, *Unto This Last* is a deeply idiosyncratic masterpiece.



About this edition

SECTIONS

1. What this edition offers you
2. Things to know

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↑ **What this edition offers you** This Edition Sec 1

1. Although *Unto This Last* is great writing, it is hard reading.
2. This new edition offers many benefits to modern readers. First, there are QuikScan summaries placed throughout the text.
3. We also point out “must read” and “skippable” passages, and there are two introductory essays and complete notes. A version without these reading suggestions is available.

▲1 Even though *Unto This Last* is great writing, it is difficult reading for most of us today. Ruskin's sentences are elaborately constructed, and his arguments are often complex. Furthermore, he refers to events about which we likely know little or nothing, and he assumes his readers are intimately familiar with the Christian Bible and Greek and Roman literature.

▲2 This new edition unlocks the door for modern readers and points out the best things in the room. Because this is a QuikScan edition, the text has been carefully divided into (hyperlinked) sections, and for each section there is a summary. The summaries give you the gist of each section

before you tackle Ruskin’s Victorian prose. Plus, if a section does not seem interesting, you can just read the summary and proceed to the next section. If you read both the summaries and the full text, retention increases dramatically. For more information, including the benefits of QuikScan for blind and low-vision readers, see the [research on QuikScan](#).

Another feature of QuikScan are numbers that let you easily switch from an the idea in a summary and the place in Ruskin’s text where that idea is fully discussed.

▲ 3 Yellow highlighting is used to indicate passages in Ruskin’s text that we regard as especially important for mainstream readers. Sepia font color is used for less important passages that you may want to skip. This “must read” or “skippable” status is also shown in the summaries, but we think you should read each summary completely, even the parts in sepia.

For those who don’t want these reading suggestions or don’t want this much color in the text, an alternative version without yellow highlighting and sepia is available from the editor, David K. Farkas, upon request: farkas AT uw.edu

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↑ Things to know This Edition Sec 2

1. You will see superscript footnote numbers in the text for the footnotes Ruskin wrote. The Notes file contains both Ruskin’s footnotes and the editor’s footnotes.
2. The division of the chapters into sections is QuikScan, not Ruskin.
3. *Unto This Last* can also be read using the more flexible QuikScan web app.
4. This text of this edition is the digitized version of the George Allen edition of 1904.

▲ 1 Ruskin's wrote his own footnotes, some brief and some quite lengthy, and so there are footnote numbers in the text. A few of Ruskin’s footnotes are “must read” and so the footnote numbers are have a yellow highlight (and red font). The footnote numbers for most skippable footnotes are in a faded sepia with a gray highlight.

Each section of the book is followed by a notes section (in olive font). The editor’s notes are not marked in Ruskin’s text (just Ruskin’s own footnotes). But if you see something confusing, look in notes section. The editor’s footnotes are very extensive and so there is probably an explanation.

▲ 2 Remember that the division of the essays into sections and the section titles were added as part of the QuikScanning. Ruskin did not use headings. Ruskin did, however, add his own numbers to mark divisions of the text. His divisions, as far as I can determine, are idiosyncratic. [Wilmer](#), in his edition of Ruskin’s works, leaves them out. In this edition, these numbers (taken from the Cook and Wedderburn Library Edition) appear in parentheses at the end of any paragraph where Ruskin placed a number . Also, these paragraphs are slightly indented. Scholars will find these numbers helpful if they use this edition in conjunction with a scholarly edition or a secondary source that has retained Ruskin's numbers.

▲ 3 There is a QuikScan Views web app that offers more flexibility than the PDF version. For example, you can switch off the colors that mark “must read” and “skippable” parts of *Unto This Last*. Visit <http://www.quikscan.org/library> for this version of *Unto This Last* and for other important works in a growing library of QuikScan editions.

▲ 4 This text of this edition of *Unto This Last* is derived from the digitized version of the George Allen edition of 1904 (Sunnyside, Orpington, Kent) prepared by the University of Virginia Electronic

Text Center. I have made small changes in the punctuation, including using double quotes (more familiar to the modern reader) and spacing around dashes. Obvious scanning errors were corrected.



***Unto This Last* by John Ruskin**

“FRIEND, I DO THEE NO WRONG. DID’ST NOT THOU AGREE WITH ME FOR A PENNY? TAKE THAT THINE IS, AND GO THY WAY. I WILL GIVE UNTO THIS LAST EVEN AS UNTO THEE.”

“IF YE THINK GOOD, GIVE ME MY PRICE; AND IF NOT, FORBEAR. SO THEY WEIGHED FOR MY PRICE THIRTY PIECES OF SILVER.”

Ch. 1 The Roots of Honor

SECTIONS

1. “Political economy” is a delusion
2. Political economy doesn’t address fundamental human motivations
3. The example of servants and the master of the household
4. The example of soldiers and their officers
5. We need to fix wages so they don’t fluctuate with economic conditions
6. Merchants must become unselfish and willingly sacrifice for their workers

Tips:

1 Yellow highlighting indicates “must read” text. Sepia font marks text that modern readers may want to skip.

2 Black section headings hyperlink to the beginning of that section. TOC links jump up to the Table of Contents.

3 To view the notes for each section, just scroll down or click the links that look like this:

[Ch1 Sec 1 notes»](#). Dark green note section headings jump back to the corresponding section of the text.

4 You can also jump to Ruskin’s own footnotes by clicking the superscript footnote numbers in the text. These numbers are also color coded to indicate “must read” footnotes and footnotes modern readers will probably want to skip.

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↑ **“Political economy” is a delusion** Ch1 Sec 1

[notes»](#)

1. The science of political economy is a delusion because it is based on the idea that social action does not need to consider “social affection,” the ability of human beings to care about one another.
2. Like other delusions, the root idea is plausible: Social affection, says the economist, is unpredictable, while greed is a constant. Therefore, it’s best for economists to consider the human being as a “covetous machine.” Each individual can then think what they like about social affection.
3. This idea fails, however, because social affections can’t just be added into our calculations about economic science. Rather the social affections totally disrupt political economy.
4. Political economy, then, is simply irrelevant to real life, like a science of gymnastics that assumed that people had no skeletons.

▲1 Among the delusions which at different periods have possessed themselves of the minds of large masses of the human race, perhaps the most curious—certainly the least creditable—is the modern soi-disant science of political economy, based on the idea that an advantageous code of social action may be determined irrespectively of the influence of social affection. (1)

▲2 Of course, as in the instances of alchemy, astrology, witchcraft, and other such popular creeds, political economy, has a plausible idea at the root of it. “The social affections,” says the economist, “are accidental and disturbing elements in human nature; but avarice and the desire of progress are constant elements. Let us eliminate the inconstants, and, considering the human being merely as a covetous machine, examine by what laws of labour, purchase, and sale, the greatest accumulative result in wealth is obtainable.

Those laws once determined, it will be for each individual afterwards to introduce as much of the disturbing affectionate element as he chooses, and to determine for himself the result on the new conditions supposed.”

▲3 This would be a perfectly logical and successful method of analysis, if the accidentals afterwards to be introduced were of the same nature as the powers first examined. Supposing a body in motion to be influenced by constant and inconstant forces, it is usually the simplest way of examining its course to trace it first under the persistent conditions, and afterwards introduce the causes of variation. But the disturbing elements in the social problem are not of the same nature as the constant ones: they alter the essence of the creature under examination the moment they are added; they operate, not mathematically, but chemically, introducing conditions which render all

our previous knowledge unavailable. We made learned experiments upon pure nitrogen, and have convinced ourselves that it is a very manageable gas: but, behold! the thing which we have practically to deal with is its chloride; and this, the moment we touch it on our established principles, sends us and our apparatus through the ceiling. (2)

▲4 Observe, I neither impugn nor doubt the conclusion of the science if its terms are accepted. I am simply uninterested in them, as I should be in those of a science of gymnastics which assumed that men had no skeletons. It might be shown, on that supposition, that it would be advantageous to roll the students up into pellets, flatten them into cakes, or stretch them into cables; and that when these results were effected, the re-insertion of the skeleton would be attended with various inconveniences to their constitution. The reasoning might be admirable, the conclusions true, and the science deficient only in applicability. Modern political economy stands on a precisely similar basis. Assuming, not that the human being has no skeleton, but that it is all skeleton, it founds an ossifant theory of progress on this negation of a soul; and having shown the utmost that may be made of bones, and constructed a number of interesting geometrical figures with death's-head and humeri, successfully proves the inconvenience of the reappearance of a soul among these corpuscular structures. I do not deny the truth of this theory: I simply deny its applicability to the present phase of the world. (3)

Notes about the book

text»

Title of the book

The title, “Unto this Last” refers to Christ's Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard from Matthew 20:1-16. In this parable, a vineyard owner goes to the marketplace several times during the day and evening and hires groups of day laborers who are hoping to find work. When the day's work is done, he chooses to pay them all the same amount of money. Those laborers who worked the whole day complain. The vineyard owner responds that they were paid the agreed-upon price, and they have no reason to complain if he chooses to give the same pay to those who worked fewer hours.

The conventional religious meaning is that Jesus offers salvation to all people, regardless of when they find their faith. However, in the context of *Unto This Last*, the vineyard owner is a generous employer who wishes to pay all his workers a living wage, even though some did not find employment with him until late in the day.

Epigraphs for the book

“FRIEND, I DO THEE NO WRONG. . . .” This epigraph is explained above in the note explaining the book title.

“IF YE THINK GOOD, GIVE ME MY PRICE; AND IF NOT, FORBEAR. SO THEY WEIGHED FOR MY PRICE THIRTY PIECES OF SILVER.” Zechariah 11:12. The significance of this Biblical quotation is not entirely clear. One of the themes of Chapter 4, “Ad Valorem,” is price, and Ruskin repeats part of this epigraph in Chapter 4. More broadly, this quotation may refer simply to commerce. Also, Christians often interpret this verse as a reference to Judas' betrayal of Christ.«

Notes for Chapter 1

text»

Summary of this chapter, “The Roots of Honor”

The chapter begins with Ruskin's attack on political economists for regarding human beings as purely self-interested and ignoring the human capacity for kindness, generosity, and love (“social affection”). He uses examples to show that an unselfish master will receive the best work from his servants and that soldiers will fight hardest when they know that their commanding officer truly cares about them.

Recognizing that these close bonds are not likely to form between a factory owner and his many employees, Ruskin proposes that labor be regulated so that workers in each job category get the same pay (as is done in certain professions such as the ministry and law). The result will be that good workers won't need to fear being replaced by bad workers who will work cheaply. Also, Ruskin wants employers to stop hiring workers on a daily basis in hope of paying the lowest possible wages. Workers must know they will have enough employment to survive the week.

Finally, Ruskin argues that merchants need assume a parental responsibility for their employees. In vivid, passionate language he insists that merchants must be willing to make sacrifices—such as keeping employees on the payroll when business is slow—both for the good of their employees and the nation.

The title of this chapter: “The Roots of Honor”

For Ruskin, honor comes from a concern for social justice and, more specifically, the willingness of business owners to assume a personal responsibility for the well-being of their employees.

“Political economy” is a delusion (Ch1 Sec1)

[text»](#)

▲ 1

“The social affections,” says the economist . . .

Ruskin often oversimplifies the views of John Stuart Mill and other orthodox political economists. However, prominent economists, members of the business elite, and political did hold ideas similar to those Ruskin is attacking (see [Fain](#)).

▲ 3

Ruskin, who originally planned to be a geologist, is knowledgeable about science and is very willing to show off this knowledge in this elaborate analogy drawn from chemistry. Ruskin's point is that you can't try to analyze human behavior without taking emotions and affection into account.

▲ 4

“Observe, I neither impugn nor doubt”

The elaborate and striking analogy is highly fanciful but also grotesque.

“ossifiant” = boney

“humeri”

The long bone in the arm that extends from the shoulder to the elbow. The phrase “death's head and humeri” suggests the Jolly Roger flag flown by pirates, implying that political economists countenance economic piracy.

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↑ Political economy doesn't address fundamental human motivations Ch1 Sec 2

[notes»](#)

1. As evidence of its irrelevance, consider that political economy can offer no help regarding the current crisis of labor unrest.
2. Economists vainly try to determine whether or not the masters and the workers have conflicting interests. But conflicting interests don't have to result in any antagonism, as I show here:
3. When a family has just a scrap of bread to eat, the mother may willingly do without food for the sake of her children—even though she has conflicting interests.
4. On the larger scale, it's never really clear what actions benefit the masters or laborers. With starvation wages, the master loses productivity. If workers get excessive wages, jobs may disappear.
5. Instead of looking at who benefits from particular actions, we really need to think about justice—which is based largely on social affection. We can all understand what is just, and just behavior benefits us all.

▲1 This inapplicability has been curiously manifested during the embarrassment caused by the late strikes of our workmen. Here occurs one of the simplest cases, in a pertinent and positive form, of the first vital problem which political economy has to deal with (the relation between employer and employed); and, at a severe crisis, when lives in multitudes and wealth in masses are at stake, the political economists are helpless—practically mute: no demonstrable solution of the difficulty can be given by them, such as may convince or calm the opposing parties. Obstinate the masters take one view of the matter. obstinate the operatives another; and no political science can set them at one. (4)

▲2 It would be strange if it could, it being not by “science” of any kind that men were ever intended to be set at one. Disputant after disputant vainly strives to show that the interests of the masters are, or are not, antagonistic to those of the men: none of the pleaders ever seeming to remember that it does not absolutely or always follow that the persons must be antagonistic because their interests are. ▲3 If there is only a crust of bread in the house, and mother and children are starving, their interests are not the same. If the mother eats it, the children want it; if the children eat it, the mother must go hungry to her work. yet it does not necessarily follow that there will be “antagonism” between them, that they will fight for the crust, and that the mother, being strongest, will get it, and eat it. Neither, in any other case, whatever the relations of the persons may be, can it be assumed for certain that, because their interests are diverse, they must necessarily regard each other with hostility, and use violence or cunning to obtain the advantage. (5)

▲4 Even if this were so, and it were as just as it is convenient to consider men as actuated by no other moral influences than those which affect rats or swine, the logical conditions of the question are still indeterminable. It can never be shown generally either that the interests of master and labourer are alike, or that they are opposed; for, according to circumstances, they may be either. It is, indeed, always the interest of both that the work should be rightly done, and a just price obtained for it; but, in the division of profits, the gain of the one may or may not be the loss of the other. It is not the master's interest to pay wages so low as to leave the men sickly and depressed, nor the workman's interest to be paid high wages if the smallness of the master's profit hinders him from enlarging his business, or conducting it in a safe and liberal way. A stoker ought not to desire high pay if the company is too poor to keep the engine-wheels in repair. (6)

And the varieties of circumstances which influence these reciprocal interests are so endless, that all endeavour to deduce rules of action from balance of expediency is in vain. And it is meant to be in vain. For no human actions ever were intended by the maker of men to be guided by balances of expediency, ▲5 but by balances of justice. He has therefore rendered all endeavours to determine expediency futile for evermore. No man ever knew, or can know, what will be the ultimate result to himself, or to others, of any given line of conduct. But every man may know, and most of us do know, what is a just and unjust act. And all of us may know also, that the consequences of justice will be ultimately the best possible, both to others and ourselves, though we can neither say what is best, or how it is likely to come to pass. (7)

I have said balances of justice, meaning, in the term justice, to include affection,—such affection as one man owes to another. All right relations between master and operative, and all their best interests, ultimately depend on these.

Political economy doesn't address fundamental human motivations (Ch1 Sec2)

text»

▲1-2

Ruskin is pointing out that emotions, as much as financial calculations, are a key factor in a strike and that political economy, because it excludes emotions, can't offer guidance for how to resolve such conflicts.

▲3

Ruskin now shows very vividly that human emotion and love trump narrow calculation of advantage. Indeed, a mother will starve for her children's sake.

▲4

“rats or swine”

Ruskin repeatedly makes the point that political economists regard human beings as though they were animals with no thought other than survival.

▲5

“justice”

Ruskin now shifts the argument and opens up one of the key themes in the book. Justice is not what's written in law books. When we take advantage of another person—though it may be legal—it is not justice. Justice comes about naturally when we exercise our own humanity and recognize the humanity in others.

“one man owes to another”

Like almost everyone else in Victorian England, Ruskin consistently refers to men (and not women or people in general) and assumes (accurately) that almost all political leaders, merchants, and other prominent participants in public life are male. Ruskin, however, is passionate in honoring women as keepers of the home and nurturers of children. In a striking passage in *The Two Paths* (“The Works of Iron,” III, 1 “The Plough”), he speaks of the woman's needle as a kind of equivalent to the man's plough in ensuring a prosperous household and, by extension, a prosperous, happy nation.

TOC

↑ The example of servants and the master of the household Ch1 Sec 3

notes»

1. The master who works his servants as hard as he possibly can and pays as little as he can get away with—that's the economist's idea of the most productive relationship. This passes as “justice.”

2. This model would work if the servant were some kind of machine, but the servant's Soul really determines how much gets done, and this totally disrupts the economist's calculations.
3. A master who is both competent and benevolent will—through mutual affection, not antagonism—get the most and best work from his servants.
4. Moreover, if a cynical master treats the servant kindly only to gain practical benefits, there will be no practical benefits.

▲1 We shall find the best and simplest illustration of the relations of master and operative in the position of domestic servants. (8)

We will suppose that the master of a household desires only to get as much work out of his servants as he can, at the rate of wages he gives. He never allows them to be idle; feeds them as poorly and lodges them as ill as they will endure, and in all things pushes his requirements to the exact point beyond which he cannot go without forcing the servant to leave him. In doing this, there is no violation on his part of what is commonly called "justice." He agrees with the domestic for his whole time and service, and takes them; —the limits of hardship in treatment being fixed by the practice of other masters in his neighbourhood; that is to say, by the current rate of wages for domestic labour. If the servant can get a better place, he is free to take one, and the master can only tell what is the real market value of his labour, by requiring as much as he will give.

This is the politico-economical view of the case, according to the doctors of that science; who assert that by this procedure the greatest average of work will be obtained from the servant, and therefore the greatest benefit to the community, and through the community, by reversion, to the servant himself.

▲2 That, however, is not so. It would be so if the servant were an engine of which the motive power was steam, magnetism, gravitation, or any other agent of calculable force. But he being, on the contrary, an engine whose motive power is a Soul, the force of this very peculiar agent, as an unknown quantity, enters into all the political economist's equations, without his knowledge, and falsifies every one of their results. The largest quantity of work will not be done by this curious engine for pay, or under pressure, or by help of any kind of fuel which may be supplied by the caldron. It will be done only when the motive force, that is to say, the will or spirit of the creature, is brought to its greatest strength by its own proper fuel: namely, by the affections.

▲3 It may indeed happen, and does happen often, that if the master is a man of sense and energy, a large quantity of material work may be done under mechanical pressure, enforced by strong will and guided by wise method; also it may happen, and does happen often, that if the master is indolent and weak (however good-natured), a very small quantity of work, and that bad, may be produced by the servant's undirected strength, and contemptuous gratitude. But the universal law of the matter is that, assuming any given quantity of energy and sense in master and servant, the greatest material result obtainable by them will be, not through antagonism to each other, but through affection for each other; and that if the master, instead of endeavouring to get as much work as possible from the servant, seeks rather to render his appointed and necessary work beneficial to him, and to forward his interests in all just and wholesome ways, the real amount of work ultimately done, or of good rendered, by the person so cared for, will indeed be the greatest possible. (9)

Observe, I say, "of good rendered," for a servant's work is not necessarily or always the best thing he can give his master. But good of all kinds, whether in material service, in protective watchfulness of his master's interest and credit, or in joyful readiness to seize unexpected and irregular occasions of help.

Nor is this one whit less generally true because indulgence will be frequently abused, and kindness met with ingratitude. For the servant who, gently treated, is ungrateful, treated ungenerally, will be revengeful; and the man who is dishonest to a liberal master will be injurious to an unjust one.

In any case, and with any person, this unselfish treatment will produce the most effective return. Observe, I am here considering the affections wholly as a motive power; not at all as things in themselves desirable or noble, or in any other way abstractedly good. I look at them simply as an anomalous force, rendering every one of the ordinary political economist's calculations nugatory; while, even if he desired to introduce this new element into his estimates, he has no power of dealing with it; ▲ 4 for the affections only become a true motive power when they ignore every other motive and condition of political economy. Treat the servant kindly, with the idea of turning his gratitude to account, and you will get, as you deserve, no gratitude, nor any value for your kindness; but treat him kindly without any economical purpose, and all economical purposes will be answered; in this, as in all other matters, whosoever will save his life shall lose it, whoso loses it shall find it 1(10)

The example of servants and the master of the household (Ch1 Sec3)

text»

▲ 1–3

Ruskin is challenging Utilitarian idea that human beings are motivated by self interest and that the greatest good comes about my regulating the self-interested behavior of human beings to produce the greatest good. The free market, say the Utilitarians, determines the wages that should be paid and this wage along with the master's harsh treatment of his servants ultimately benefits the entire community, including the servants themselves. This free-market, laissez faire economics remains a potent strain of thought today.

Ruskin argues that affection between the master and servants is what will produce the greatest amount of good work. Notice the echo if the chemistry analogy presented in Section 1. “Soul” is the unpredictable element that invalidates Utilitarian calculations.

▲ 4

“Treat the servant kindly”

This seems like a questionable argument. At least at the level of a business—which is where Ruskin is leading us—it seems that an employer who treats his employees well—regardless of the motive—will likely benefit from the employees recognition of their good treatment (even if they believe or suspect that the employer is doing this out of self interest.

whosoever will save his life shall lose it, whoso loses it shall find it

“He that findeth his life, shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake, shall find it.” Matthew 10:39. This is one of many instances in which Ruskin infuses his writing with Scripture. He doesn't appear to be making a specific point with this reference.

Ruskin footnote 1—on Charles Dickens

Ruskin deeply appreciates Dickens as a social critic and asks his readers to take Dickens' ideas seriously, even though Dickens, as a writer of fiction, employs exaggeration and caricature. Ruskin recognizes that *Hard Times* especially attacks Utilitarianism, and states that he wished that Dickens would write more realistically when he addresses important social issues. It is interesting that Ruskin, although an essayist, uses a measure of exaggeration to make his points.

The difference between the two modes of treatment, and between their effective material results, may be seen very accurately by a comparison of the relations of Esther and Charlie in *Bleak House*, with those of Miss Brass and the Marchioness in *Master Humphrey's Clock*.

The essential value and truth of Dickens's writings have been unwisely lost sight of by many thoughtful persons, merely because he presents his truth with some colour of caricature. Unwisely, because Dickens's caricature, though often gross, is never mistaken. Allowing for his manner of telling them, the things he tells us are always true. I wish that he could think it right to limit his brilliant exaggeration to works written only for public amusement; and when he takes up a subject of high national importance, such as that which he handled in *Hard Times*, that he would use severer and more accurate analysis. The usefulness of that work (to my mind, in several respects, the greatest he has written) is with many persons seriously diminished because Mr. Bounderby is a dramatic monster, instead of a characteristic example of a worldly master; and Stephen Blackpool a dramatic perfection, instead of a characteristic example of an honest workman. But let us not lose the use of Dickens's wit and insight, because he chooses to speak in a circle of stage fire. He is entirely right in his main drift and purpose in every book he has written; and all of them, but especially *Hard Times*, should be studied with close and earnest care by persons interested in social questions. They will find much that is partial, and, because partial, apparently unjust; but if they examine all the evidence on the other side, which Dickens seems to overlook, it will appear, after all their trouble, that his view was the finally right one, grossly and sharply told. [Back](#)

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↑ **The example of soldiers and their officers** Ch1

Sec 4

[notes»](#)

The officer who relies only on discipline will be less effective than the officer who truly cares about his men and builds their affection and trust.

▲ The next clearest and simplest example of relation between master and operative is that which exists between the commander of a regiment and his men.(11)

Supposing the officer only desires to apply the rules of discipline so as, with least trouble to himself, to make the regiment most effective, he will not be able, by any rules or administration of rules, on this selfish principle, to develop the full strength of his subordinates. If a man of sense and firmness, he may, as in the former instance, produce a better result than would be obtained by the irregular kindness of a weak officer; but let the sense and firmness be the same in both cases, and assuredly the officer who has the most direct personal relations with his men, the most care for their interests, and the most value for their lives, will develop their effective strength, through their affection for his own person, and trust in his character, to a degree wholly unattainable by other means. This law applies still more stringently as the numbers concerned are larger: a charge may often be successful, though the men dislike their officers; a battle has rarely been won, unless they loved their general.

The example of soldiers and their officers (Ch1 Sec4)

No notes for this section

[text»](#)

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↑ We need to fix wages so they don't fluctuate with economic conditions Ch1 Sec 5

[notes»](#)

1. The relationship between a manufacturer and his workmen is more complex. Salaries are governed by the prevailing rate, and so loyalty and affection are eliminated.
2. But let's consider the possibility of (1) an established rate of pay for each category of work and (2) employers building loyalty by keeping workers on the job even when business is slack.
3. Regarding (1): Consider that a prime minister, a bishop, a general, and a physician all work for an established rate of pay. Why not the same for workers?
4. Furthermore, no worker should undercut another worker by asking for less. The reward for quality work is knowing you'll be hired.
5. Regarding (2), a more complex situation: If workers know their jobs are secure, they will willingly work for less and will live more orderly lives. Employers, therefore, should respect this and not optimize for themselves with constant layoffs.

▲1 Passing from these simple examples to the more complicated relations existing between a manufacturer and his workmen, we are met first by certain curious difficulties, resulting, apparently, from a harder and colder state of moral elements. It is easy to imagine an enthusiastic affection existing among soldiers for the colonel. Not so easy to imagine an enthusiastic affection among cotton-spinners for the proprietor of the mill. A body of men associated for purposes of robbery (as a Highland clan in ancient times) shall be animated by perfect affection, and every member of it be ready to lay down his life for the life of his chief. But a band of men associated for purposes of legal production and accumulation is usually animated, it appears, by no such emotions, and none of them are in any wise willing to give his life for the life of his chief. Not only are we met by this apparent anomaly, in moral matters, but by others connected with it, in administration of system. For a servant or a soldier is engaged at a definite rate of wages, for a definite period; but a workman at a rate of wages variable according to the demand for labour, and with the risk of being at any time thrown out of his situation by chances of trade. Now, as, under these contingencies, no action of the affections can take place, but only an explosive action of disaffections, two points offer themselves for consideration in the matter. (12)

▲2 The first—How far the rate of wages may be so regulated as not to vary with the demand for labour.

The second—How far it is possible that bodies of workmen may be engaged and maintained at such fixed rate of wages (whatever the state of trade may be), without enlarging or diminishing their number, so as to give them permanent interest in the establishment with which they are connected, like that of the domestic servants in an old family, or an esprit de corps, like that of the soldiers in a crack regiment.

▲3 The first question is, I say, how far it may be possible to fix the rate of wages, irrespectively of the demand for labour. (13)

Perhaps one of the most curious facts in the history of human error is the denial by the common political economist of the possibility of thus regulating wages; while, for all the important, and much of the unimportant, labour, on the earth, wages are already so regulated.

We do not sell our prime-ministership by Dutch auction; nor, on the decease of a bishop, whatever may be the general advantages of simony, do we (yet) offer his diocese to the clergyman who will take the episcopacy at the lowest contract. We (with exquisite sagacity of political economy!) do indeed sell commissions; but not openly, generalships: sick, we do not inquire for a physician who takes less than a guinea; litigious, we never think of reducing six-and-eight-pence to four-and-sixpence; caught in a shower, we do not canvass the cabmen, to find one who values his driving at less than sixpence a mile.

It is true that in all these cases there is, and in every conceivable case there must be, ultimate reference to the presumed difficulty of the work, or number of candidates for the office. If it were thought that the labour necessary to make a good physician would be gone through by a sufficient number of students with the prospect of only half-guinea fees, public consent would soon withdraw the unnecessary half-guinea. In this ultimate sense, the price of labour is indeed always regulated by the demand for it; but, so far as the practical and immediate administration of the matter is regarded, the best labour always has been, and is, as all labour ought to be, paid by an invariable standard.

▲4 “What!” the reader perhaps answers amazedly: “pay good and bad workmen alike?” (14)

Certainly. The difference between one prelate's sermons and his successor's—or between one physician's opinion and another's—is far greater, as respects the qualities of mind involved, and far more important in result to you personally, than the difference between good and bad laying of bricks (though that is greater than most people suppose). Yet you pay with equal fee, contentedly, the good and bad workmen upon your soul, and the good and bad workmen upon your body; much more may you pay, contentedly, with equal fees, the good and bad workmen upon your house.

“Nay, but I choose my physician and my clergyman, thus indicating my sense of the quality of their work.” By all means, also, choose your bricklayer; that is the proper reward of the good workman, to be “chosen.” The natural and right system respecting all labour is, that it should be paid at a fixed rate, but the good workman employed, and the bad workman unemployed. The false, unnatural, and destructive system is when the bad workman is allowed to offer his work at half-price, and either take the place of the good, or force him by his competition to work for an inadequate sum.

▲5 This equality of wages, then, being the first object toward which we have to discover the directest available road; the second is, as above stated, that of maintaining constant numbers of workmen in employment, whatever may be the accidental demand for the article they produce. (15)

I believe the sudden and extensive inequalities of demand, which necessarily arise in the mercantile operations of an active nation, constitute the only essential difficulty which has to be overcome in a just organization of labour. The subject opens into too many branches to admit of being investigated in a paper of this kind; but the following general facts bearing on it may be noted.

The wages which enable any workman to live are necessarily higher, if his work is liable to intermission, than if it is assured and continuous; and however severe the struggle for work may become, the general law will always hold, that men must get more daily pay if, on the average, they can only calculate on work three days a week than they would require if they were sure of work six days a week. Supposing that a man cannot live on less than a shilling a day, his seven shillings he

must get, either for three days' violent work, or six days' deliberate work. The tendency of all modern mercantile operations is to throw both wages and trade into the form of a lottery, and to make the workman's pay depend on intermittent exertion, and the principal's profit on dexterously used chance.

In what partial degree, I repeat, this may be necessary in consequence of the activities of modern trade, I do not here investigate; contenting myself with the fact, that in its fatalest aspects it is assuredly unnecessary, and results merely from love of gambling on the part of the masters, and from ignorance and sensuality in the men. The masters cannot bear to let any opportunity of gain escape them, and frantically rush at every gap and breach in the walls of Fortune, raging to be rich, and affronting, with impatient covetousness, every risk of ruin, while the men prefer three days of violent labour, and three days of drunkenness, to six days of moderate work and wise rest. There is no way in which a principal, who really desires to help his workmen, may do it more effectually than by checking these disorderly habits both in himself and them; keeping his own business operations on a scale which will enable him to pursue them securely, not yielding to temptations of precarious gain; and, at the same time, leading his workmen into regular habits of labour and life, either by inducing them rather to take low wages in the form of a fixed salary, than high wages, subject to the chance of their being thrown out of work; or, if this be impossible, by discouraging the system of violent exertion for nominally high day wages, and leading the men to take lower pay for more regular labour. (16)

In effecting any radical changes of this kind, doubtless there would be great inconvenience and loss incurred by all the originators of movement. That which can be done with perfect convenience and without loss, is not always the thing that most needs to be done, or which we are most imperatively required to do.

We need to fix wages so they don't fluctuate with economic conditions (Ch1 Sec5)

text»

▲1

“Passing from these simple examples”

Ruskin recognizes that his arguments about the power of social affection do not scale to the very broad level of national economy, and so as a kind of substitute he asks employers to try to keep their workforce employed even during periods when business is slack, and he proposes a system of regulating wages so that a workers will know how much they will be paid each week.

Ruskin does not typically propose national policy in UTL, but here is an exception. In the Preface to the book version of UTL, Ruskin, looking back on the four *Cornhill Magazine* essays expresses some regret because this “startling” proposal overshadowed his primary aim, which was to re-define the concept of “wealth.”

We now have the minimum wage and transfer payments, which ensure that people will at least survive. Ruskin doesn't emphasize government intervention—see the Preface of UTL—but he did recognize the dire need for change.

▲2

“. . . an esprit de corps, like that of the soldiers in a crack regiment.”

Ruskin expects a great deal from workers who have received from their employers secure employment.

▲3

“Dutch auction”

A kind of auction in which the lowest bidder wins.

“simony”

“Simony” means selling church positions. The phrase “general advantages” is ironic; Ruskin certainly does not approve of simony. His point is that the salary of bishops is fixed. Those seeking the position do not compete with one another by offering to take the lowest salary.

▲5

Rushing at every gap in the walls of fortune

Note the astonishing vividness of this metaphor for a relatively abstract idea that employers try to maximize profits by hiring on a short term basis rather than offering more secure employment:

“The masters cannot bear to let any opportunity of gain escape them, and frantically rush at every gap and breach in the walls of Fortune, raging to be rich, and affronting, with impatient covetousness, every risk of ruin.”

Somewhat realized today by laws requiring a minimum wage--though such laws do not assure duration of employment.

A modern equivalent of Ruskin's plea that employers keep their workers employed during business downturns is the Keynesian principle that increased government spending can reduce the rate of unemployment during a recession. Ruskin's thinking is, from a contemporary point of view, often limited because he has little sense of the possibility of government economic policy and government intervention in the economy.

TOC

↑ Merchants must become unselfish and willingly sacrifice for their workers

Ch1 Sec 6

notes»

1. Soldiers are respected because we know they are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for their country.
2. Lawyers, physicians, and clergyman are respected because self-sacrifice is inherent to their professions.
3. Merchants, despite their undeniable abilities and the importance of commerce, are not honored because they are presumed to always act selfishly.
4. But true commerce, as society will need to learn, is not exclusively selfish. The true merchant provides for his nation and for those he employs. The true merchant is willing to accept losses out of a sense of duty.
5. The true merchant or manufacturer has a parental responsibility and should treat his employees as his children and should be willing to sacrifice for them as a parent would.
6. Yes, this doctrine sounds strange but it should not. All other political thinking is false and will lead to national destruction.

▲ 1 I have already alluded to the difference hitherto existing between regiments of men associated for purposes of violence, and for purposes of manufacture; in that the former appear capable of self-sacrifice— the latter, not; which singular fact is the real reason of the general lowness of estimate in which the profession of commerce is held, as compared with that of arms. Philosophically, it does not, at first sight, appear reasonable (many writers have endeavoured to prove it unreasonable) that a peaceable and rational person, whose trade is buying and selling, should be held in less honour than an unpeaceable and often irrational person, whose trade is slaying. Nevertheless, the consent of mankind has always, in spite of the philosophers, given precedence to the soldier. (17)

And this is right.

For the soldier's trade, verily and essentially, is not slaying, but being slain. This, without well knowing its own meaning, the world honours it for. A bravo's trade is slaying; but the world has never respected bravos more than merchants: the reason it honours the soldier is, because he holds his life at the service of the State. Reckless he may be—fond of pleasure or of adventure—all kinds of bye-motives and mean impulses may have determined the choice of his profession, and may affect (to all appearance exclusively) his daily conduct in it; but our estimate of him is based on this ultimate fact—of which we are well assured—that put him in a fortress breach, with all the pleasures of the world behind him, and only death and his duty in front of him, he will keep his face to the front; and he knows that his choice may be put to him at any moment—and has beforehand taken his part— virtually takes such part continually—does, in reality, die daily.

▲2 Not less is the respect we pay to the lawyer and physician, founded ultimately on their self-sacrifice. Whatever the learning or acuteness of a great lawyer, our chief respect for him depends on our belief that, set in a judge's seat, he will strive to judge justly, come of it what may. Could we suppose that he would take bribes, and use his acuteness and legal knowledge to give plausibility to iniquitous decisions, no degree of intellect would win for him our respect. Nothing will win it, short of our tacit conviction, that in all important acts of his life justice is first with him; his own interest, second. (18)

In the case of a physician, the ground of the honour we render him is clearer still. Whatever his science, we would shrink from him in horror if we found him regard his patients merely as subjects to experiment upon; much more, if we found that, receiving bribes from persons interested in their deaths, he was using his best skill to give poison in the mask of medicine.

Finally, the principle holds with utmost clearness as it respects clergymen. No goodness of disposition will excuse want of science in a physician, or of shrewdness in an advocate; but a clergyman, even though his power of intellect be small, is respected on the presumed ground of his unselfishness and serviceableness.

Now, there can be no question but that the tact, foresight, decision, and other mental powers, required for the successful management of a large mercantile concern, if not such as could be compared with those of a great lawyer, general, or divine, would at least match the general conditions of mind required in the subordinate officers of a ship, or of a regiment, or in the curate of a country parish. If, therefore, all the efficient members of the so-called liberal professions are still, somehow, in public estimate of honour, preferred before the head of a commercial firm, the reason must lie deeper than in the measurement of their several powers of mind. (19)

▲3 And the essential reason for such preference will he found to lie in the fact that the merchant is presumed to act always selfishly. His work may be very necessary to the community. but the motive of it is understood to be wholly personal. The merchant's first object in all his dealings must be (the public believe) to get as much for himself, and leave as little to his neighbour (or customer) as possible. Enforcing this upon him, by political statute, as the necessary principle of his action; recommending it to him on all occasions, and themselves reciprocally adopting it, proclaiming vociferously, for law of the universe, that a buyer's function is to cheapen, and a seller's to cheat,—the public, nevertheless, involuntarily condemn the man of commerce for his compliance with their own statement, and stamp him for ever as belonging to an inferior grade of human personality.

▲4 This they will find, eventually, they must give up doing. They must not cease to condemn selfishness; but they will have to discover a kind of commerce which is not exclusively selfish. Or, rather, they will have to discover that there never was, or can be, any other kind of commerce; that this which they have called commerce was not commerce at all, but cozening; and that a true merchant differs as much from a merchant according to laws of modern political economy, as the hero of the Excursion from Autolycus. They will find that commerce is an occupation which gentlemen will every day see more need to engage in, rather than in the businesses of talking to men, or slaying them; that, in true commerce, as in true preaching, or true fighting, it is necessary to admit the idea of occasional voluntary loss; —that sixpences have to be lost, as well as lives, under a sense of duty. that the market may have its martyrdoms as well as the pulpit; and trade its heroisms as well as war.(20)

May have—in the final issue, must have-and only has not had yet, because men of heroic temper have always been misguided in their youth into other fields; not recognising what is in our days, perhaps, the most important of all fields; so that, while many a jealous person loses his life in trying to teach the form of a gospel, very few will lose a hundred pounds in showing the practice of one.

The fact is, that people never have had clearly explained to them the true functions of a merchant with respect to other people. I should like the reader to be very clear about this. (21)

Five great intellectual professions, relating to daily necessities of life, have hitherto existed—three exist necessarily, in every civilised nation:

- The Soldier's profession is to *defend* it
- The Pastor's to *teach* it.
- The Physician's to keep it in health
- The Lawyer's to *enforce* justice in it.

The Merchant's to *provide* for it. And the duty of all these men is, on due occasion, to *die* for it.

“On due occasion,” namely:-

- The Soldier, rather than leave his post in battle.
- The Pastor, rather than teach Falsehood.
- The Physician's to keep it in health.
- The Lawyer, rather than countenance Injustice.
- The Merchant-what is *his* “due occasion” of death?

It is the main question for the merchant, as for all of us. For, truly, the man who does not know when to die, does not know how to live. (22)

Observe, the merchant's function (or manufacturer's, for in the broad sense in which it is here used the word must be understood to include both) is to provide for the nation. It is no more his function to get profit for himself out of that provision than it is a clergyman's function to get his stipend. This stipend is a due and necessary adjunct, but not the object of his life, if he be a true clergyman, any more than his fee (or honorarium) is the object of life to a true physician. Neither is his fee the object of life to a true merchant. All three, if true men, have a work to be done irrespective of fee—to be done even at any cost, or for quite the contrary of fee; the pastor's function being to teach, the physician's to heal, and the merchant's, as I have said, to provide. That is to say, he has to understand to their very root the qualities of the thing he deals in, and the means of obtaining or producing it; and he has to apply all his sagacity and energy to the producing or obtaining it in perfect state, and distributing it at the cheapest possible price where it is most needed.

And because the production or obtaining of any commodity involves necessarily the agency of many lives and hands, the merchant becomes in the course of his business the master and governor of large masses of men in a more direct, though less confessed way, than a military officer or pastor; so that on him falls, in great part, the responsibility for the kind of life they lead: and it becomes his duty, not only to be always considering how to produce what he sells, in the purest and cheapest forms, but how to make the various employments involved in the production, or transference of it, most beneficial to the men employed.

And as into these two functions, requiring for their right exercise the highest intelligence, as well as patience, kindness, and tact, the merchant is bound to put all his energy, so for their just discharge he is bound, as soldier or physician is bound, to give up, if need be, his life, in such way as it may be demanded of him. Two main points he has in his providing function to maintain: first, his engagements (faithfulness to engagements being the real root of all possibilities, in commerce); and, secondly, the perfectness and purity of the thing provided; so that, rather than fail in any engagement, or consent to any deterioration, adulteration, or unjust and exorbitant price of that

which he provides, he is bound to meet fearlessly any form of distress, poverty, or labour, which may, through maintenance of these points, come upon him. (23)

▲5 Again: in his office as governor of the men employed by him, the merchant or manufacturer is invested with a distinctly paternal authority and responsibility. In most cases, a youth entering a commercial establishment is withdrawn altogether from home influence; his master must become his father, else he has, for practical and constant help, no father at hand: in all cases the master's authority, together with the general tone and atmosphere of his business, and the character of the men with whom the youth is compelled in the course of it to associate, have more immediate and pressing weight than the home influence, and will usually neutralize it either for good or evil; so that the only means which the master has of doing justice to the men employed by him is to ask himself sternly whether he is dealing with such subordinate as he would with his own son, if compelled by circumstances to take such a position. (24)

Supposing the captain of a frigate saw it right, or were by any chance obliged, to place his own son in the position of a common sailor: as he would then treat his son, he is bound always to treat every one of the men under him. So, also, supposing the master of a manufactory saw it right, or were by any chance obliged, to place his own son in the position of an ordinary workman; as he would then treat his son, he is bound always to treat every one of his men. This is the only effective, true, or practical Rule which can be given on this point of political economy.

▲6 All which sounds very strange: the only real strangeness in the matter being, nevertheless, that it should so sound. For all this is true, and that not partially nor theoretically, but everlastingly and practically: all other doctrine than this respecting matters political being false in premises, absurd in deduction, and impossible in practice, consistently with any progressive state of national life; all the life which we now possess as a nation showing itself in the resolute denial and scorn, by a few strong minds and faithful hearts, of the economic principles taught to our multitudes, which principles, so far as accepted, lead straight to national destruction. Respecting the modes and forms of destruction to which they lead, and, on the other hand, respecting the farther practical working of true polity, I hope to reason farther in a following paper. (25).

Merchants must become unselfish and willingly sacrifice for their workers (Ch1 Sec6)

text»

In an important shift within this essay, Ruskin now broadens his argument from a specific proposal that might require economic sacrifice from employers to a much broader argument that business should (and ultimately must) become a deeply moral enterprise: The business man's first aim is to provide for the nation and personal gain is only secondary. In other words, business becomes akin to the calling to serve God in the ministry. The wealthy merchants and industrialists reading this issue of *Cornhill Magazine* must indeed have been astonished by Ruskin's audacity.

▲ 1

“the soldier's trade”

Ruskin has a gift for framing and phrasing his ideas dramatically, even when not engaged in satire. He enjoys taking a provocative stance toward his audience.

“For the soldier's trade, verily and essentially, is not slaying, but being slain.”

“bravos”

A bravo is a desperado or murderer.

“does, in reality, die daily”

A reference to 1 Corinthians 15:31: “I protest by your rejoicing which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily.” Ruskin's writing is infused with quotations from and allusions to the Bible. In this edition, references to the source of Ruskin's Biblical quotations and allusions are kept to a minimum. For complete references to scripture, see a scholarly edition of *Unto This Last*.

▲ 2

“respect we pay to the lawyer”

Ruskin's idea that lawyers act without regard to their self-interest is definitely a stretch. Ruskin tries to make the argument work by discussing lawyers as though they were judges, who we commonly view as accepting the responsibility to carry out justice without regard to their own potential gain.

Ruskin tells us, in his third footnote to Chapter 3, “Qui Judicatis Terram,” that lawyers themselves rejected (with amusement) his idealistic view of the legal profession:

I hear that several of our lawyers have been greatly amused by the statement in the first of these papers that a lawyer's function was to do justice. I did not intend it for a jest; nevertheless it will be seen that in the above passage neither the determination nor doing of justice are contemplated as functions wholly peculiar to the lawyer. Possibly, the more our standing armies, whether of soldiers, pastors, or legislators (the generic term “pastor” including all teachers, and the generic term “lawyer” including makers as well as interpreters of law), can be superseded by the force of national heroism, wisdom, and honesty, the better it may be for the nation.

▲ 3–4

Ruskin, departing radically from standard economic theory, often frames commerce as inherently a “zero-sum game.” That is, when one person to become more wealthy, another becomes poorer. This assumption underlies the extremely provocative argument presented here: that commerce as it is routinely carried out is immoral, a form of cozening (cheating). *A true merchant, that is a merchant who is an moral, honorable person must moderate his or her desire for profit and consider ethical dimension of the transaction and whether the transaction is contributing to the overall betterment of the state.* In Chapter 3, “The Veins of Wealth” Ruskin includes hypothetical examples in which highly inefficient markets predatory commerce.

Without going nearly as far as Ruskin, we can say that predatory commerce is not hard to find in modern capitalism. Notable examples in the United States include much of the mortgage lending that led up to the Great Recession of 2008 and, very plausibly, the entire business of payday lending.

▲4

The idea that merchants will willingly endure financial loss for the sake of their employees and the nation as a whole seems quaint and naive in our modern era of corporate capitalism in which very large global corporations typically show little or no loyalty to their employees or the communities in which they grew, and are very willing hire temporary workers, outsource labor, and close factories in order to move their manufacturing to states with lower wages or offshore. They also use their considerable political influence to promote legislation and regulations that enhance corporate profits (ultimately paid in large part to wealthy investors) with little or no regard to the larger social good.

There are, however, notable instances in which individual business owners have behaved as Ruskin would wish: “The Malden Mills factory burned down on December 11, 1995. CEO Aaron Feuerstein decided to continue paying the salaries of all the now-unemployed workers while the factory was being rebuilt. By going against common CEO business practices, especially at a time when most companies were downsizing and moving overseas, he achieved recognition for doing the right thing.” *Wikipedia*, “Malden Mills.”

“The Hero of the Excursion . . . Autolycus”

Wordsworth's *Excursion* was written in 1814. Its hero, a peddler in the mountain district of England, was the chief means of communication from the outer world to the remote glens and dales of the North. Autolycus (Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*) is also a peddler, but he is a thief (though an amusing rogue). [Susan Cunnington]

“people never have had clearly explained to them the true functions of a merchant”

Ruskin's father was a wine merchant, and Ruskin deeply respected his father for many reasons, including his utter integrity in business.

“The Soldier, rather than leave his post in battle”

Ruskin hates war, but he honors soldiers.

“the merchant becomes in the course of his business the master and governor of large masses of men”

There is a reflection here of Thomas Carlyle’s famous notion of “Captions of Industry.” Carlyle, whose views on social issues influenced Ruskin, believed . . . Ruskin returns soon to the analogy of a merchant to a of ship’s caption.

“perfectness and purity of the thing provided”

One responsibility of merchants and manufacturers producing and selling only the highest quality products. Ruskin returns repeatedly (and perhaps obsessively) to this idea, going so far as (in “Ad Valorem,” Sec 3 #1), complaining about low quality meat for sale in London markets.

▲5

“paternal authority”

In many ways, the heart of Ruskin’s moral and political thinking is that the rich and powerful need to assume parental authority over the “mass of men.” Ruskin is not at all egalitarian. He totally accepts distinctions of social class and riches, and he does not want to see workers fight for political power. But he is adamant that the rich and powerful must care deeply for their workers and for the general well-being of their nation—much as a parent cares deeply about his children.

▲6

“All which sounds very strange”

Here is one of many instances in which Ruskin exhorts his readers in a tone of high moral seriousness. without playfulness, invective or satire



Ch. 2 The Veins of Wealth

SECTIONS

1. What the word "rich" really means
2. How rich men enjoy their riches
3. The example of inequality: Two farmers (shipwrecked sailors)
4. The example of the merchant who exploits two farmers
5. The limitations of monetary wealth. The nature of true wealth.

TOC

↑ **What the word "rich" really means** Ch2 Sec 1

notes»

1. Political economists respond that political economy is simply the science of getting rich and that it has enriched all the capitalists of Europe.
2. In fact, businessmen don't know political economy. They know only mercantile economy and only the part of mercantile economy that made them rich.

3. Furthermore they refuse to recognize that in the mercantile economy being rich requires that someone else be poor (“a zero sum game”).
4. Political economy is about adding to the total well-being of the nation. Conscientious farmers, housewives, shipwrights, and many others all contribute.
5. Mercantile economy (commercial wealth) is simply about one person’s claim upon and power over the labor of someone else. It does not necessarily contribute to the state’s well being.
6. Men think of riches in terms of commercial wealth because it is can instantly be converted into property, while property is harder to convert into commercial wealth.
7. They think this also because we typically can’t enjoy our property unless we have the power over someone’s labor—as illustrated by the example of the rich man who cannot find a servant.

▲1 The answer which would be made by any ordinary political economist to the statements contained in the preceding paper, is in few words as follows: (26)

“It is indeed true that certain advantages of a general nature may be obtained by the development of social affections. But political economists never professed, nor profess, to take advantages of a general nature into consideration. Our science is simply the science of getting rich. So far from being a fallacious or visionary one, it is found by experience to be practically effective. Persons who follow its precepts do actually become rich, and persons who disobey them become poor. Every capitalist of Europe has acquired his fortune by following the known laws of our science, and increases his capital daily by an adherence to them. It is vain to bring forward tricks of logic, against the force of accomplished facts. Every man of business knows by experience how money is made, and how it is lost.”

▲2 Pardon me. Men of business do indeed know how they themselves made their money, or how, on occasion, they lost it. Playing a long-practised game, they are familiar with the chances of its cards, and can rightly explain their losses and gains. But they neither know who keeps the bank of the gambling-house, nor what other games may be played with the same cards, nor what other losses and gains, far away among the dark streets, are essentially, though invisibly, dependent on theirs in the lighted rooms. They have learned a few, and only a few, of the laws of mercantile economy; but not one of those of political economy.

Primarily, which is very notable and curious, I observe that men of business rarely know the meaning of the word “rich.” At least, if they know, they do not in their reasonings allow for the fact, that it is a relative word, implying its opposite “poor” as positively as the word “north” implies its opposite “south.” ▲3 Men nearly always speak and write as if riches were absolute, and it were possible, by following certain scientific precepts, for everybody to be rich. Whereas riches are a power like that of electricity, acting only through inequalities or negations of itself. The force of the guinea you have in your pocket depends wholly on the default of a guinea in your neighbour’s pocket. If he did not want it, it would be of no use to you; the degree of power it possesses depends accurately upon the need or desire he has for it,—and the art of making yourself rich, in the ordinary mercantile economist’s sense, is therefore equally and necessarily the art of keeping your neighbour poor. (27)

▲4 Political economy (the economy of a State, or of citizens) consists simply in the production, preservation, and distribution, at fittest time and place, of useful or pleasurable things. The farmer who cuts his hay at the right time; the shipwright who drives his bolts well home in sound wood; the builder who lays good bricks in well-tempered mortar; the housewife who takes care of her furniture in the parlour, and guards against all waste in her kitchen; and the singer who rightly disciplines, and never overstrains her voice, are all political economists in the true and final sense: adding continually to the riches and well-being of the nation to which they belong. (28)

▲5 But mercantile economy, the economy of “merces” or of “pay,” signifies the accumulation, in the hands of individuals, of legal or moral claim upon, or power over, the labour of others; every such claim implying precisely as much poverty or debt on one side, as it implies riches or right on the other.

It does not, therefore, necessarily involve an addition to the actual property, or well-being, of the State in which it exists. ▲6 But since this commercial wealth, or power over labour, is nearly always convertible at once into real property, while real property is not always convertible at once into power over labour, the idea of riches among active men in civilized nations, generally refers to commercial wealth; and in estimating their possessions, they rather calculate the value of their horses and fields by the number of guineas they could get for them, than the value of their guineas by the number of horses and fields they could buy with them.

▲7 There is, however, another reason for this habit of mind; namely, that an accumulation of real property is of little use to its owner, unless, together with it, he has commercial power over labour. Thus, suppose any person to be put in possession of a large estate of fruitful land, with rich beds of gold in its gravel, countless herds of cattle in its pastures; houses, and gardens, and storehouses full of useful stores; but suppose, after all, that he could get no servants? In order that he may be able to have servants, some one in his neighbourhood must be poor, and in want of his gold—or his corn. Assume that no one is in want of either, and that no servants are to be had. He must, therefore, bake his own bread, make his own clothes, plough his own ground, and shepherd his own flocks. His gold will be as useful to him as any other yellow pebbles on his estate. His stores must rot, for he cannot consume them. He can eat no more than another man could eat, and wear no more than another man could wear. He must lead a life of severe and common labour to procure even ordinary comforts; he will be ultimately unable to keep either houses in repair, or fields in cultivation; and forced to content himself with a poor man's portion of cottage and garden, in the midst of a desert of waste land, trampled by wild cattle, and encumbered by ruins of palaces, which he will hardly mock at himself by calling “his own.” (29)

Notes for Chapter 2

[text»](#)

Summary of Chapter 2 “The Veins of Wealth”

In this chapter Ruskin considers the concept of wealth and contrasts “mercantile economy,” the accumulation of money, with true wealth. Political economists, says Ruskin, only think about mercantile economy. Ignoring true wealth, they regard their discipline simply as the science of getting rich.

Riches gives you power over other men, but rich men, because they understand only mercantile economy, don't use this power well. Their money circulates through the nation like the flow of blood through a diseased person. Ruskin uses two examples to show that in the mercantile economy getting richer makes another person poorer. It's a zero-sum game.

True wealth is measured by the number of prosperous, noble people that a nation can show. When England finally recognizes this, she will point to her people and say “These are my jewels.”

The title of this chapter: “The Veins of Wealth”

Because the true wealth of a nation is the well-being of its people, the true veins of wealth are the veins of men.

“What the word “rich” really means (Ch2 Sec1)

[text»](#)

▲ 1

Ruskin begins this chapter by setting up a distinction between mercantile economy (ordinary commercial wealth) and political economy, which Ruskin redefines to mean commercial activity that benefits everyone (the “state”). Mercantile economy or “merces” is about individual wealth or “accumulation.” It is, Ruskin argues, what contemporary economic theory teaches and justifies.

▲ 2

“far away among the dark streets”

This grim contrast of the lighted rooms of the wealthy and the dark streets of the powerless re-appears in “Essay 4 (“Ad Valorem),” Section 7, #4), where the losers in the cruel economic system retire to the “back streets” to “other places of shade” and finally “out of sight in graves.” Ruskin can be a powerful writer.

“invisibly, dependent on theirs in the lighted rooms.”

Here Ruskin is making his argument that in the normal mercantile economy one person's accumulation is another person's want (a “zero-sum” game).

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↑ **How rich men enjoy their riches** Ch2 Sec 2

notes»

1. What rich men really want is control over those who have little. And, our riches are worth more when most people are poor.
2. For example, if there is but one rich person, the musician will have to sing for what that person will pay.
3. One fallacy of political economy is that the inequality of wealth is inherently advantageous to the nation. In fact, inequalities can arise in either a just or unjust manner and can be either beneficial or destructive.
4. Thus the circulation of wealth in a nation is like the circulation of blood—it may be healthy or else diseased

The most covetous of mankind would, with small exultation, I presume, accept riches of this kind on these terms. ▲1 What is really desired, under the name of riches, is essentially, power over men; in its simplest sense, the power of obtaining for our own advantage the labour of servant, tradesman, and artist; in wider sense, authority of directing large masses of the nation to various ends (good, trivial or hurtful, according to the mind of the rich person). And this power of wealth of course is greater or less in direct proportion to the poverty of the men over whom it is exercised, and in inverse proportion to the number of persons who are as rich as ourselves, and who are ready to give the same price for an article of which the supply is limited. ▲2 If the musician is poor, he will sing for small pay, as long as there is only one person who can pay him; but if there be two or three, he will sing for the one who offers him most. And thus the power of the riches of the patron (always imperfect and doubtful, as we shall see presently, even when most authoritative) depends first on the poverty of the artist, and then on the limitation of the number of equally wealthy persons, who also want seats at the concert. So that, as above stated, the art of becoming “rich,” in the common sense, is not absolutely nor finally the art of accumulating much money for ourselves, but also of contriving that our neighbours shall have less. In accurate terms, it is “the art of establishing the maximum inequality in our own favour.” (30)

▲3 Now, the establishment of such inequality cannot be shown in the abstract to be either advantageous or disadvantageous to the body of the nation. The rash and absurd assumption that such inequalities are necessarily advantageous, lies at the root of most of the popular fallacies on the subject of political economy. For the eternal and inevitable law in this matter is, that the beneficialness of the inequality depends, first, on the methods by which it was accomplished; and, secondly, on the purposes to which it is applied. Inequalities of wealth, unjustly established, have assuredly injured the nation in which they exist during their establishment; and, unjustly directed, injure it yet more during their existence. But inequalities of wealth, justly established, benefit the nation in the course of their establishment; and, nobly used, aid it yet more by their existence. That is to say, among every active and well-governed people, the various strength of individuals, tested by full exertion and specially applied to various need, issues in unequal, but harmonious results, receiving reward or authority according to its class and service;¹ while, in the inactive or ill-governed nation, the gradations of decay and the victories of treason work out also their own rugged system of subjection and success; and substitute, for the melodious inequalities of concurrent power, the iniquitous dominances and depressions of guilt and misfortune.(31)

▲4 Thus the circulation of wealth in a nation resembles that of the blood in the natural body. There is one quickness of the current which comes of cheerful emotion or wholesome exercise; and another which comes of shame or of fever. There is a flush of the body which is full of warmth and life; and another which will pass into putrefaction. (32)

The analogy will hold down even to minute particulars. For as diseased local determination of the blood involves depression of the general health of the system, all morbid local action of riches will be found ultimately to involve a weakening of the resources of the body politic.

The mode in which this is produced may be at once understood by examining one or two instances of the development of wealth in the simplest possible circumstances.

How rich men enjoy their riches (Ch2 Sec2)

[text»](#)

▲3

Ruskin is no Socialist (as he makes very clear). He is not opposed to inequality of wealth. Indeed, he regards this inequality as natural and inevitable. The issue for Ruskin is whether those who have wealth and power use it well, use it for the benefit of all.

Ruskin footnote 1—bad workmen left unemployed

Ruskin's comment on rogues as "manufactured articles" is effective satire directed at the general failure of society encourage people to become successful and law-abiding individuals. This comment on education as a means to reduce crime and imprisonment remains compelling to this day.

I have been naturally asked several times, with respect to the sentence in the first of these papers, "the bad workmen unemployed," "But what are you to do with your bad unemployed workmen?" Well, it seems to me the question might have occurred to you before. Your housemaid's place is vacant—you give twenty pounds a year—two girls come for it, one neatly dressed, the other dirtily; one with good recommendations, the other with none. You do not, under these circumstances, usually ask the dirty one if she will come for fifteen pounds, or twelve; and, on her consenting, take her instead of the well-recommended one. Still less do you try to beat both down by making them bid against each other, till you can hire both, one at twelve pounds a year, and the other at eight. You simply take the one fittest for the place, and send away the other, not perhaps concerning yourself quite as much as you should with the question which you now impatiently put to me, "What is to become of her?" For all that I advise you to do, is to deal with workmen as with servants; and verily the question is of weight: "Your bad workman, idler, and rogue—what are you to do with him?"

We will consider of this presently: remember that the administration of a complete system of national commerce and industry cannot be explained in full detail within the space of twelve pages. Meantime, consider whether, there being confessedly some difficulty in dealing with rogues and idlers, it may not be advisable to produce as few of them as possible. If you examine into the history of rogues, you will find they are as truly manufactured articles as anything else, and it is just because our present system of political economy gives so large a stimulus to that manufacture that you may know it to be a false one. We had better seek for a system which will develop honest men, than for one which will deal cunningly with vagabonds. Let us reform our schools, and we shall find little reform needed in our prisons. [Back](#)

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↑ **The example of inequality: Two farmers (shipwrecked sailors)** Ch2 Sec 3

[notes»](#)

1. Let's imagine two shipwrecked sailors who begin farming together, achieve prosperity, and then decide to divide the land into two separate farms.
2. One farmer becomes ill and requires assistance from the other. He therefore signs a binding agreement to work the fields of the other farmer after he recovers.
3. Collectively, this little society is poorer due to the illness of one of the two men, but a huge inequality of wealth will likely arise so that one farmer can live in idleness while the other toils.
4. Inequalities can arise in various ways. The important point is that the establishment of mercantile wealth often arises with the decline of the totality of real wealth.

▲1 Suppose two sailors cast away on an uninhabited coast, and obliged to maintain themselves there by their own labour for a series of years. (33)

If they both kept their health, and worked steadily and in amity with each other, they might build themselves a convenient house, and in time come to possess a certain quantity of cultivated land, together with various stores laid up for future use. All these things would be real riches or property; and, supposing the men both to have worked equally hard, they would each have right to equal share or use of it. Their political economy would consist merely in careful preservation and just division of these possessions. Perhaps, however, after some time one or other might be dissatisfied with the results of their common farming; and they might in consequence agree to divide the land they had brought under the spade into equal shares, so that each might thenceforward work in his own field, and live by it. ▲2 Suppose that after this arrangement had been made, one of them were to fall ill, and be unable to work on his land at a critical time—say of sowing or harvest.

He would naturally ask the other to sow or reap for him.

Then his companion might say, with perfect justice, "I will do this additional work for you; but if I do it, you must promise to do as much for me at another time. I will count how many hours I spend on your ground, and you shall give me a written promise to work for the same number of hours on mine, whenever I need your help, and you are able to give it."

Suppose the disabled man's sickness to continue, and that under various circumstances, for several years, requiring the help of the other, he on each occasion gave a written pledge to work, as soon as he was able, at his companion's orders, for the same number of hours which the other had given up to him. What will the positions of the two men be when the invalid is able to resume work? (34)

▲3 Considered as a "Polis," or state, they will be poorer than they would have been otherwise: poorer by the withdrawal of what the sick man's labour would have produced in the interval. His friend may perhaps have toiled with an energy quickened by the enlarged need, but in the end his own land and property must have suffered by the withdrawal of so much of his time and thought from them: and the united property of the two men will be certainly less than it would have been if both had remained in health and activity.

But the relations in which they stand to each other are also widely altered. The sick man has not only pledged his labour for some years, but will probably have exhausted his own share of the accumulated stores, and will be in consequence for some time dependent on the other for food, which he can only "pay" or reward him for by yet more deeply pledging his own labour.

Supposing the written promises to be held entirely valid (among civilized nations their validity is secured by legal measures²), the person who had hitherto worked for both might now, if he chose, rest altogether, and pass his time in idleness, not only forcing his companion to redeem all the

engagements he had already entered into, but exacting from him pledges for further labour, to an arbitrary amount, for what food he had to advance to him.

There might not, from first to last, be the least illegality (in the ordinary sense of the word) in the arrangement; but if a stranger arrived on the coast at this advanced epoch of their political economy, he would find one man commercially Rich; the other commercially Poor. He would see, perhaps, with no small surprise, one passing his days in idleness; the other labouring for both, and living sparely, in the hope of recovering his independence at some distant period. (35)

▲4 This is, of course, an example of one only out of many ways in which inequality of possession may be established between different persons, giving rise to the Mercantile forms of Riches and Poverty. In the instance before us, one of the men might from the first have deliberately chosen to be idle, and to put his life in pawn for present ease; or he might have mismanaged his land, and been compelled to have recourse to his neighbour for food and help, pledging his future labour for it. But what I want the reader to note especially is the fact, common to a large number of typical cases of this kind, that the establishment of the mercantile wealth which consists in a claim upon labour, signifies a political diminution of the real wealth which consists in substantial possessions.

The example of inequality: Two farmers (shipwrecked sailors) (Ch2 Sec3)

text

▲3

Ruskin footnote 2—on the nature of money

The disputes which exist respecting the real nature of money arise more from the disputants examining its functions on different sides, than from any real dissent in their opinions. All money, properly so called, is an acknowledgment of debt; but as such, it may either be considered to represent the labour and property of the creditor, or the idleness and penury of the debtor. The intricacy of the question has been much increased by the (hitherto necessary) use of marketable commodities, such as gold, silver, salt, shells, &c., to give intrinsic value or security to currency; but the final and best definition of money is that it is a documentary promise ratified and guaranteed by the nation to give or find a certain quantity of labour on demand. A man's labour for a day is a better standard of value than a measure of any produce, because no produce ever maintains a consistent rate of productibility. [Back](#)

▲4

Ruskin gives us the metaphor of the beneficial circulation of wealth through a nation. This argument shifts at the end of the chapter to the idea that happy, noble individuals rather than money constitute the wealth of a nation.

TOC

↑ The example of the merchant who exploits two farmers Ch2 Sec 4

notes

1. Envision two farmers and a merchant who controls the trade between them.

2. Suppose the merchant manipulates supply and demand between the two farmers. Eventually, the two impoverished farmers become the merchant's servants.
3. We see that wealth always has a moral dimension. It may arise justly from productive energy or from merciless tyranny (exploitation).
4. Nothing is as disgraceful as the economic principle to buy at the cheapest price and sell at the dearest. What really matters is the social justice that underlies all your transactions.

▲1 Take another example, more consistent with the ordinary course of affairs of trade. Suppose that three men, instead of two, formed the little isolated republic, and found themselves obliged to separate, in order to farm different pieces of land at some distance from each other along the coast: each estate furnishing a distinct kind of produce, and each more or less in need of the material raised on the other. Suppose that the third man, in order to save the time of all three, undertakes simply to superintend the transference of commodities from one farm to the other; on condition of receiving some sufficiently remunerative share of every parcel of goods conveyed, or of some other parcel received in exchange for it. (36)

▲2 If this carrier or messenger always brings to each estate, from the other, what is chiefly wanted, at the right time, the operations of the two farmers will go on prosperously, and the largest possible result in produce, or wealth, will be attained by the little community. But suppose no intercourse between the landowners is possible, except through the travelling agent; and that, after a time, this agent, watching the course of each man's agriculture, keeps back the articles with which he has been entrusted until there comes a period of extreme necessity for them, on one side or other, and then exacts in exchange for them all that the distressed farmer can spare of other kinds of produce: it is easy to see that by ingeniously watching his opportunities, he might possess himself regularly of the greater part of the superfluous produce of the two estates, and at last, in some year of severest trial or scarcity, purchase both for himself and maintain the former proprietors thenceforward as his labourers or servants.

This would be a case of commercial wealth acquired on the exactest principles of modern political economy. But more distinctly even than in the former instance, it is manifest in this that the wealth of the State, or of the three men considered as a society, is collectively less than it would have been had the merchant been content with juster profit. The operations of the two agriculturists have been cramped to the utmost; and the continual limitations of the supply of things they wanted at critical times, together with the failure of courage consequent on the prolongation of a struggle for mere existence, without any sense of permanent gain, must have seriously diminished the effective results of their labour; and the stores finally accumulated in the merchant's hands will not in any wise be of equivalent value to those which, had his dealings been honest, would have filled at once the granaries of the farmers and his own. (37)

▲3 The whole question, therefore, respecting not only the advantage, but even the quantity, of national wealth, resolves itself finally into one of abstract justice. It is impossible to conclude, of any given mass of acquired wealth, merely by the fact of its existence, whether it signifies good or evil to the nation in the midst of which it exists. Its real value depends on the moral sign attached to it, just as sternly as that of a mathematical quantity depends on the algebraical sign attached to it. Any given accumulation of commercial wealth may be indicative, on the one hand, of faithful industries, progressive energies, and productive ingenuities: or, on the other, it may be indicative of mortal luxury, merciless tyranny, ruinous chicane. Some treasures are heavy with human tears, as an ill-stored harvest with untimely rain; and some gold is brighter in sunshine than it is in substance.

And these are not, observe, merely moral or pathetic attributes of riches, which the seeker of riches may, if he chooses, despise; they are, literally and sternly, material attributes of riches,

depreciating or exalting, incalculably, the monetary signification of the sum in question. One mass of money is the outcome of action which has created, another, of action which has annihilated, — ten times as much in the gathering of it; such and such strong hands have been paralyzed, as if they had been numbed by nightshade: so many strong men's courage broken, so many productive operations hindered; this and the other false direction given to labour, and lying image of prosperity set up, on Dura plains dug into seven-times-heated furnaces. That which seems to be wealth may in verity be only the gilded index of far-reaching ruin: a wrecker's handful of coin gleaned from the beach to which he has beguiled an argosy; a camp-follower's bundle of rags unwrapped from the breasts of goodly soldiers dead; the purchase-pieces of potter's fields, wherein shall be buried together the citizen and the stranger. (38)

And therefore, the idea that directions can be given for the gaining of wealth, irrespectively of the consideration of its moral sources, or that any general and technical law of purchase and gain can be set down for national practice, is perhaps the most insolently futile of all that ever beguiled men through their vices. ▲ 4 So far as I know, there is not in history record of anything so disgraceful to the human intellect as the modern idea that the commercial text, "Buy in the cheapest market and sell in the dearest," represents, or under any circumstances could represent, an available principle of national economy. Buy in the cheapest market? yes; but what made your market cheap? Charcoal may be cheap among your roof timbers after a fire, and bricks may be cheap in your streets after an earthquake; but fire and earthquake may not therefore be national benefits. Sell in the dearest? — Yes, truly; but what made your market dear? You sold your bread well to-day: was it to a dying man who gave his last coin for it, and will never need bread more; or to a rich man who to-morrow will buy your farm over your head; or to a soldier on his way to pillage the bank in which you have put your fortune?

None of these things you can know. One thing only you can know: namely, whether this dealing of yours is a just and faithful one, which is all you need concern yourself about respecting it; sure thus to have done your own part in bringing about ultimately in the world a state of things which will not issue in pillage or in death. And thus every question concerning these things merges itself ultimately in the great question of justice, which, the ground being thus far cleared for it. I will enter upon the next paper, leaving only, in this, three final points for the reader's consideration.

TOC

The example of the merchant who exploits two farmers (Ch2 Sec4)

text

▲3

“pathetic attributes of riches”

Here “pathetic” means “emotional.”

“on Dura plains” (Daniel 3:1.)

“wrecker's handful of coin”

Wrecking, in this context, is the practice of causing a vessel (argosy) to shipwreck by setting up a false beacon or fire and then plundering the vessel's cargo.

“the purchase-pieces of potter's fields” (Mathew 27:7)

“buy your farm over your head”

This means that the rich man has managed to purchase your farm (possibly because you are only renting it), even though you want to keep it.

▲4

“Buy in the cheapest market and sell in the dearest,”

Ruskin attacks this fundamental principle of commerce as essentially predatory.

TOC

↑ The limitations of monetary wealth. The nature of true wealth. Ch2 Sec 5

notes

1. The power over other men that is achieved by money is always imperfect. Furthermore, many of the joys of life cannot be bought with gold.
2. Moral power, “invisible gold,” is just as real as bullion. Political scientists should take heed of this.
3. The authority conferred by wealth seems to be failing now in England. Servants, wanting their pay, disobey.
4. The true veins of wealth are the veins of men, and the true purpose of wealth is producing active, happy people—though modern wealth appears to work the other way.
5. Perhaps England will one day reject the doctrine of monetary wealth and declare that its people are the nation's jewels.

▲ 1 It has been shown that the chief value and virtue of money consists in its having power over human beings; that, without this power, large material possessions are useless, and to any person possessing such power, comparatively unnecessary. But power over human beings is attainable by other means than by money. As I said a few pages back, the money power is always imperfect and doubtful; there are many things which cannot be reached with it, others which cannot be retained by it. Many joys may be given to men which cannot be bought for gold, and many fidelities found in them which cannot be rewarded with it

▲ 2 Trite enough, —the reader thinks. Yes: but it is not so trite, —I wish it were, —that in this moral power, quite inscrutable and immeasurable though it be, there is a monetary value just as real as that represented by more ponderous currencies. A man's hand may be full of invisible gold, and the wave of it, or the grasp, shall do more than another's with a shower of bullion. This invisible gold, also, does not necessarily diminish in spending. Political economists will do well some day to take heed of it, though they cannot take measure.

▲ 3 But farther. Since the essence of wealth consists in its authority over men, if the apparent or nominal wealth fail in this power, it fails in essence; in fact, ceases to be wealth at all. It does not appear lately in England, that our authority over men is absolute. The servants show some disposition to rush riotously upstairs, under an impression that their wages are not regularly paid. We should augur ill of any gentleman's property to whom this happened every other day in his drawing-room.

▲ 4 Finally. Since the essence of wealth consists in power over men, will it not follow that the nobler and the more in number the persons are over whom it has power, the greater the wealth? Perhaps it may even appear, after some consideration, that the persons themselves are the wealth that these pieces of gold with which we are in the habit of guiding them, are, in fact, nothing more than a kind of Byzantine harness or trappings, very glittering and beautiful in barbaric sight, wherewith we bridle the creatures; but that if these same living creatures could be guided without the fretting and jingling of the Byzants in their mouths and ears, they might themselves be more valuable than their bridles. In fact, it may be discovered that the true veins of wealth are purple—and not in Rock, but in Flesh—perhaps even that the final outcome and consummation of all wealth is in the producing as many as possible full-breathed, bright-eyed, and happy-hearted human creatures. Our modern wealth, I think, has rather a tendency the other way; —most political economists appearing to consider multitudes of human creatures not conducive to wealth, or at best conducive to it only by remaining in a dim-eyed and narrow-chested state of being. (40).

▲ 5 Nevertheless, it is open, I repeat, to serious question, which I leave to the reader's pondering, whether, among national manufactures, that of Souls of a good quality may not at last turn out a quite leadingly lucrative one? Nay, in some far-away and yet undreamt-of hour, I can even imagine that England may cast all thoughts of possessive wealth back to the barbaric nations among whom they first arose; and that, while the sands of the Indus and adamant of Golconda may yet stiffen the housings of the charger, and flash from the turban of the slave, she, as a Christian mother, may at last attain to the virtues and the treasures of a Heathen one, and be able to lead forth her Sons, saying, —

“These are My Jewels.”

(41)

The limitations of monetary wealth. The nature of true wealth. (Ch2 Sec5)

text

▲4-5

Here Ruskin shifts his argument in a very striking manner. If wealth is the power over men's labor and, by extension, over men, the greater the number of men and the nobler these men, the greater the wealth. In fact, we might dispense with the notion of money (gold) altogether in calculating wealth in its true form. Then we can say that a true wealth, the nation's wealth, are its people.

“These are My Jewels.”

Ruskin's point is that productive and happy people are the true wealth of a nation.



Ch. 3 Qui Judicatis Terram

SECTIONS

1. Views of a Jewish “merchant” about justice
2. Economists fail to see the necessity of justice
3. Just wages
4. The destructiveness of unjust wages
5. The impossibility of equality. The evil of worshipping riches.

[TOC](#)

↑ **Views of a Jewish “merchant” about justice** Ch3 Sec 1

[notes»](#)

1. Centuries before Christ, a rich and savvy Jewish merchant left us maxims concerning wealth.
2. These writings conflict with Modern commerce: they distinguish between well-gotten and ill-gotten wealth—which will be examined this essay.

3. Repeatedly he states that getting rich through unjust means leads to death.
4. He recognizes that the inevitable meeting between rich and poor may be gentle—through justice— or else destructive. Even charity is no substitute for justice.

▲1 Some centuries before the Christian era, a Jew merchant largely engaged in business on the Gold Coast, and reported to have made one of the largest fortunes of his time, (held also in repute for much practical sagacity,) left among his ledgers some general maxims concerning wealth, which have been preserved, strangely enough, even to our own days. They were held in considerable respect by the most active traders of the middle ages, especially by the Venetians, who even went so far in their admiration as to place a statue of the old Jew on the angle of one of their principal public buildings. ▲2 Of late years these writings have fallen into disrepute, being opposed in every particular to the spirit of modern commerce. Nevertheless I shall reproduce a passage or two from them here, partly because they may interest the reader by their novelty; and chiefly because they will show him that it is possible for a very practical and acquisitive tradesman to hold, through a not unsuccessful career, that principle of distinction between well-gotten and ill-gotten wealth, which, partially insisted on in my last paper, it must be our work more completely to examine in this. (42)

▲3 He says, for instance, in one place: “The getting of treasures by a lying tongue is a vanity tossed to and fro of them that see death”: adding in another, with the same meaning (he has a curious way of doubling his sayings): “Treasures of wickedness profit nothing: but justice delivers from death.” Both these passages are notable for their assertion of death as the only real issue and sum of attainment by any unjust scheme of wealth. If we read, instead of “lying tongue,” “lying label, title, pretence, or advertisement,” we shall more clearly perceive the bearing of the words on modern business. The seeking of death is a grand expression of the true course of men's toil in such business. We usually speak as if death pursued us, and we fled from him; but that is only so in rare instances. Ordinarily he masks himself—makes himself beautiful—all-glorious; not like the King's daughter, all-glorious within, but outwardly: his clothing of wrought gold. We pursue him frantically all our days, he flying or hiding from us. Our crowning success at three-score and ten is utterly and perfectly to seize, and hold him in his eternal integrity— robes, ashes, and sting. (43)

Again: the merchant says, “He that oppressteth the poor to increase his riches, shall surely come to want.” And again, more strongly: “Rob not the poor because he is poor; neither oppress the afflicted in the place of business. For God shall spoil the soul of those that spoiled them.”

This “robbing the poor because he is poor,” is especially the mercantile form of theft, consisting in taking advantage of a man's necessities in order to obtain his labour or property at a reduced price. The ordinary highwayman's opposite form of robbery—of the rich, because he is rich—does not appear to occur so often to the old merchant's mind; probably because, being less profitable and more dangerous than the robbery of the poor, it is rarely practised by persons of discretion.

▲4 But the two most remarkable passages in their deep general significance are the following: —
“The rich and the poor have met. God is their maker.”

“The rich and the poor have met. God is their light.” (44)

They “have met:” more literally, have stood in each other's way (obviaverunt). That is to say, as long as the world lasts, the action and counteraction of wealth and poverty, the meeting, face to face, of rich and poor, is just as appointed and necessary a law of that world as the flow of stream to sea, or the interchange of power among the electric clouds: —“God is their maker.” But, also, this action may be either gentle and just, or convulsive and destructive: it may be by rage of devouring flood, or by lapse of serviceable wave; —in blackness of thunderstroke, or continual force of vital fire, soft,

and shapeable into love-syllables from far away. And which of these it shall be depends on both rich and poor knowing that God is their light; that in the mystery of human life, there is no other light than this by which they can see each other's faces, and live; —light, which is called in another of the books among which the merchant's maxims have been preserved, the “sun of justice,”¹ of which it is promised that it shall rise at last with “healing” (health-giving or helping, making whole or setting at one) in its wings. For truly this healing is only possible by means of justice; no love, no faith, no hope will do it; men will be unwisely fond-vainly faithful, unless primarily they are just; and the mistake of the best men through generation after generation, has been that great one of thinking to help the poor by almsgiving, and by preaching of patience or of hope, and by every other means, emollient or consolatory, except the one thing which God orders for them, justice. But this justice, with its accompanying holiness or helpfulness, being even by the best men denied in its trial time, is by the mass of men hated wherever it appears: so that, when the choice was one day fairly put to them, they denied the Helpful One and the Just;² and desired a murderer, sedition-raiser, and robber, to be granted to them; —the murderer instead of the Lord of Life, the sedition-raiser instead of the Prince of Peace, and the robber instead of the Just Judge of all the world.

Notes for Chapter 3

[text»](#)

Chapter Summary

Ruskin begins by satirically presenting King Solomon of the Bible as a “Jew merchant” who is successful in business but who speaks strongly about the importance of justice. His ideas, says Ruskin, are ignored today.

Economists accept no notion of justice. To follow the law is all they ask. But God holds us to a higher standard, as Dante makes clear when he says that people in positions of authority (who judge the earth) must love justice diligently, not just follow the law.

Ruskin then turns to an analysis of just wages. Money actually represents the right to ask someone to do a certain quantity of work for you. If you pay someone justly for their work, that person can ask you for the same amount of time as that person gave you in performing the work. Just wages help distribute wealth more fairly and will help the laboring classes advance.

Finally Ruskin rejects socialism and insists that there will always be inequality among individuals. The very best individuals should hold power, and inequality will inevitably make some people rich. But those who have the most must be just. The rich have no right to the property of the poor.

The title of this chapter: “Qui Judicatis Terram”

This is a shortened version of “Diligite iustitiam here iudicatis terram,” from the Biblical Book of Wisdom I: 1. This quotation appears in Section 2#5 and, in Ruskin's translation, reads, “Ye who judge the earth give diligent love to justice.” Gandhi translates the chapter title as “Even-Handed Justice.”

Views of a Jewish “merchant” about justice (Ch3 Sec1)

[text»](#)

▲1

“a Jew merchant”

Ruskin engages in satire, both sharp and funny, in the opening of this chapter. The Old Testament's King Solomon is satirically presented as a successful businessman in order to show his relevance to the business elite who are reading this. The books of the Old Testament that have been attributed to Solomon (especially the *Book of Proverbs*) are referred to as his “ledgers.”

Many of the Biblical quotations in this chapter are from the *Book of Proverbs*. If you want to know the sources of Ruskin's Biblical quotations see a scholarly edition of UTL or simply enter the quotations into an Internet search engine.

“a statue of the old Jew”

The Ducal Palace in St. Mark's Square

▲2

“these writings have fallen into disrepute”

The irony is that the Bible has fallen into disrepute. This is part of Ruskin's ongoing argument that modern commerce violates Christianity, and the capitalists have therefore chosen to largely ignore their own professed religion.

▲3

“lying label, title, pretence, or advertisement”

Ruskin despises advertising.

In Ruskin's terms, we habitually pursue death because the pursuit of wealth through unjust means is leads to spiritual death. This is powerful writing.

“taking advantage of a man's necessities”

This is Ruskin's continuing preoccupation with predatory commerce arising from highly inefficient markets. The man has no choice but to sell.

“The . . . highwayman's . . . form of robbery”

Ruskin tells us, satirically, that “men of discretion” prefer economic robbery to actual highway robbery because economic robbery is more profitable and less dangerous. Both forms of robbery are equally immoral. [Back](#)

▲4

Ruskin footnote 1—etymologies of “justice” and “righteousness”

More accurately, Sun of Justness; but, instead of the harsh word “Justness,” the old English “Righteousness” being commonly employed, has, by getting confused with “godliness,” or attracting about it various vague and broken meanings. prevented most persons from receiving the force of the passages in which it occurs. The word “righteousness” properly refers to the justice of rule, or right, as distinguished from “equity,” which refers to the justice of balance. More broadly, Righteousness is King's justice; and Equity, Judge's justice; the King guiding or ruling all, the Judge dividing or discerning between opposites (therefore the double question, “Man, who made me a ruler—δικαστής — or a divider—μεριστής—over you?”) Thus, with respect to the Justice of Choice (selection, the feebler and passive justice), we have from lego, —lex, legal, loi, and loyal; and with respect to the Justice of Rule (direction, the stronger and active justice), we have from rego, —rex, regal, roi, and royal. [Back](#)

“almsgiving”

Those who are charitable (as well as those who tell the poor to patiently endure) are well meaning but misguided. The only real answer is to incorporate justice into our business practices.

Ruskin footnote 2—“Helpful One and the Just”

In another place written with the same meaning, “Just, and having salvation.” [Back](#)

↑ Economists fail to see the necessity of justice Ch3 Sec 2

notes»

1. To economists, wealth (in particular, the relationship between supply and demand) is a stream whose flow cannot be stopped. But just as we control torrents of water, we can guide the operation of wealth.
2. Rivers that could have irrigated fields and purified the air, instead cause famine and plague—so too with the uses of wealth.
3. Economists restrict the definition of their science to how to get rich. But there are criminal means and legal but unscrupulous means to get rich.
4. If economists define their science as “how to grow rich legally,” they allow means which, while legal, are unjust. Instead, we must grow rich justly. Our economy must rest on jurisprudence, not prudence and not divine, not human, law.
5. In Dante, those who truly discern justice are a constellation of stars—eagle. Those who truly love justice are the wings of the eagle.
6. Justice is required of all men, but this has been forgotten, even by those who call themselves “saints” and “kings.” The true meaning of these titles has been lost.

▲1 I have just spoken of the flowing of streams to the sea as a partial image of the action of wealth. In one respect it is not a partial, but a perfect image. The popular economist thinks himself wise in having discovered that wealth, or the forms of property in general, must go where they are required; that where demand is, supply must follow. He farther declares that this course of demand and supply cannot be forbidden by human laws. Precisely in the same sense, and with the same certainty, the waters of the world go where they are required. Where the land falls, the water flows. The course neither of clouds nor rivers can be forbidden by human will. But the disposition and administration of them can be altered by human forethought. Whether the stream shall be a curse or a blessing, depends upon man's labour, and administrating intelligence. ▲2 For centuries after centuries, great districts of the world, rich in soil, and favoured in climate, have lain desert under the rage of their own rivers; nor only desert, but plague-struck. The stream which, rightly directed, would have flowed in soft irrigation from field to field—would have purified the air, given food to man and beast, and carried their burdens for them on its bosom—now overwhelms the plain, and poisons the wind; its breath pestilence, and its work famine. In like manner this wealth “goes where it is required.” No human laws can withstand its flow. They can only guide it: but this, the lending trench and limiting mound can do so thoroughly, that it shall become water of life—the riches of the hand of wisdom;³ or, on the contrary, by leaving it to its own lawless flow, they may make it, what it has been too often, the last and deadliest of national plagues: water of Marah—the water which feeds the roots of all evil. (45)

▲3 The necessity of these laws of distribution or restraint is curiously over-looked in the ordinary political economist's definition of his own “science.” He calls it, shortly, the “science of getting rich.” But there are many sciences, as well as many arts, of getting rich. Poisoning people of large estates, was one employed largely in the middle ages; adulteration of food of people of small estates, is one employed largely now. The ancient and honourable Highland method of blackmail; the more modern and less honourable system of obtaining goods on credit, and the other variously improved methods of appropriation—which, in major and minor scales of industry, down to the most artistic

pocket-picking, we owe to recent genius, —all come under the general head of sciences, or arts, of getting rich.

▲ 4 So that it is clear the popular economist, in calling his science the science par excellence of getting rich, must attach some peculiar ideas of limitation to its character. I hope I do not misrepresent him, by assuming that he means his science to be the science of “getting rich by legal or just means.” In this definition, is the word “just,” or “legal,” finally to stand? For it is possible among certain nations, or under certain rulers, or by help of certain advocates, that proceedings may be legal which are by no means just. If, therefore, we leave at last only the word “just” in that place of our definition, the insertion of this solitary and small word will make a notable difference in the grammar of our science. For then it will follow that, in order to grow rich scientifically, we must grow rich justly; and, therefore, know what is just; so that our economy will no longer depend merely on prudence, but on jurisprudence—and that of divine, not human law. ▲ 5 Which prudence is indeed of no mean order, holding itself, as it were, high in the air of heaven, and gazing for ever on the light of the sun of justice; hence the souls which have excelled in it are represented by Dante as stars, forming in heaven for ever the figure of the eye of an eagle: they having been in life the discerners of light from darkness; or to the whole human race, as the light of the body, which is the eye; while those souls which form the wings of the bird (giving power and dominion to justice, “healing in its wings”) trace also in light the inscription in heaven: “DILIGITE JUSTITIAM QUI JUDICATIS TERRAM.” “Ye who judge the earth, give” (not, observe, merely love, but) “diligent love to justice:” the love which seeks diligently, that is to say, choosingly, and by preference, to all things else. ▲ 6 Which judging or doing judgment in the earth is, according to their capacity and position, required not of judges only, nor of rulers only, but of all men⁴ : a truth sorrowfully lost sight of even by those who are ready enough to apply to themselves passages in which Christian men are spoken of as called to be “saints” (i.e. to helpful or healing functions); and “chosen to be kings” (i.e. to knowing or directing functions); the true meaning of these titles having been long lost through the pretences of unhelpful and unable persons to saintly and kingly character; also through the once popular idea that both the sanctity and royalty are to consist in wearing long robes and high crowns, instead of in mercy and judgment; whereas all true sanctity is saving power, as all true royalty is ruling power; and injustice is part and parcel of the denial of such power, which “makes men as the creeping things, as the fishes of the sea, that have no ruler over them.”⁵ (46)

Economists fail to see the necessity of justice (Ch3 Sec2)

[text»](#)

▲ 1–2

In Chapter 2 Ruskin compares the healthy or unhealthy circulation of wealth in a nation to the healthy or unhealthy circulation of blood in the body. Here, he compares well-managed and badly managed national wealth to a well-managed stream that brings abundance or a badly managed stream that results in either parched land or flooded land and pestilence.

▲ 2

Ruskin footnote 3—“hand of wisdom”

“Length of days in her right hand; in her left, riches and honour.” [Back](#)

▲ 3–4

Ruskin's point is that it is not enough for political economy to be the science of getting rich legally (justice narrowly defined.) Instead political economy must accept a much broader definition of justice that is deeply moral.

▲ 4

“popular economist”

This phrase is significant because Ruskin is recognizing that the thinking of the more ethically responsible economists (which would include Mill) has been distorted by the popular economists.

▲ 6

Ruskin footnote 4—lawyers' response to Ruskin's idea of legal profession

For Ruskin's idealistic statement regarding the function and responsibilities of the legal profession, see [Chapter 1, Sec 6#2](#).

I hear that several of our lawyers have been greatly amused by the statement in the first of these papers that a lawyer's function was to do justice. I did not intend it for a jest; nevertheless it will be seen that in the above passage neither the determination nor doing of justice are contemplated as functions wholly peculiar to the lawyer. Possibly, the more our standing armies, whether of soldiers, pastors, or legislators (the generic term “pastor” including all teachers, and the generic term “lawyer” including makers as well as interpreters of law), can be superseded by the force of national heroism, wisdom, and honesty, the better it may be for the nation. [Back](#)

Ruskin footnote 5—rats and wolves live by law of supply and demand

Charles Darwin published his landmark book, *On the Origin of Species*, in November 1859. Ruskin never accepted the Theory of Evolution, but he very willingly compares the underlying assumptions of political economy to animals competing ruthlessly for survival, Darwin's idea of natural selection. Later the doctrine of Social Darwinism was to explicitly formulate the idea the human society was one more instance of the survival of the fittest.

It being the privilege of the fishes, as it is of rats and wolves, to live by the laws of demand and supply; but the distinction of humanity, to live by those of right. [Back](#)

↑ Just wages Ch3 Sec 3

notes»

1. Absolute justice may be unattainable, but we can all be sufficiently just. In this regard, I return to the topic of money.
2. When a worker gives us a quantity of time and labor, a just wage is that what will procure equal time and labor—NOT the “prevailing wage” that results from coercion of the worker or the man who needs work done.
3. If the reckoning must be imprecise, surely the advantage should go to the poor man, not the employer. Though a man may have more education and skill, that’s no reason to give less of his time than he’s been given.
4. If payment comes some time after the work is done, a little more payment may be allowed.
5. Generalizing this theory of payment in the national economy is difficult—but is still easier (and far more just) than gauging the absolute least someone would take for doing work.

▲1 Absolute justice is indeed no more attainable than absolute truth; but the righteous man is distinguished from the unrighteous by his desire and hope of justice, as the true man from the false by his desire and hope of truth. And though absolute justice be unattainable, as much justice as we need for all practical use is attainable by all those who make it their aim. (47)

We have to examine, then, in the subject before us, what are the laws of justice respecting payment of labour—no small part, these, of the foundations of all jurisprudence.

I reduced, in my last paper, the idea of money payment to its simplest or radical terms. In those terms its nature, and the conditions of justice respecting it, can be best ascertained.

▲2 Money payment, as there stated, consists radically in a promise to some person working for us, that for the time and labour he spends in our service to-day we will give or procure equivalent time and labour in his service at any future time when he may demand it.⁶

If we promise to give him less labour than he has given us, we under-pay him. If we promise to give him more labour than he has given us, we over-pay him. In practice, according to the laws of demand and supply, when two men are ready to do the work, and only one man wants to have it done, the two men underbid each other for it; and the one who gets it to do, is under-paid. But when two men want the work done, and there is only one man ready to do it, the two men who want it done over-bid each other, and the workman is over-paid.

I will examine these two points of injustice in succession; but first I wish the reader to clearly understand the central principle, lying between the two, of right or just payment. (48)

When we ask a service of any man, he may either give it us freely, or demand payment for it. Respecting free gift of service, there is no question at present, that being a matter of affection—not of traffic. But if he demand payment for it, and we wish to treat him with absolute equity, it is evident that this equity can only consist in giving time for time, strength for strength, and skill for skill. If a man works an hour for us, and we only promise to work half-an-hour for him in return, we obtain an unjust advantage. If, on the contrary, we promise to work an hour and a half for him in return, he has an unjust advantage. ▲3 The justice consists in absolute exchange; or, if there be any

respect to the stations of the parties, it will not be in favour of the employer: there is certainly no equitable reason in a man's being poor, that if he give me a pound of bread to-day, I should return him less than a pound of bread to-morrow; or any equitable reason in a man's being uneducated, that if he uses a certain quantity of skill and knowledge in my service, I should use a less quantity of skill and knowledge in his. Perhaps, ultimately, it may appear desirable, or, to say the least, gracious, that I should give in return somewhat more than I received. But at present, we are concerned on the law of justice only, which is that of perfect and accurate exchange; ▲4 one circumstance only interfering with the simplicity of this radical idea of just payment—that inasmuch as labour (rightly directed) is fruitful just as seed is, the fruit (or “interest,” as it is called) of the labour first given, or “advanced,” ought to be taken into account, and balanced by an additional quantity of labour in the subsequent repayment. Supposing the repayment to take place at the end of a year, or of any other given time, this calculation could be approximately made; but as money (that is to say, cash) payment involves no reference to time (it being optional with the person paid to spend what he receives at once or after any number of years), we can only assume, generally, that some slight advantage must in equity be allowed to the person who advances the labour, so that the typical form of bargain will be: If you give me an hour to-day, I will give you an hour and five minutes on demand. If you give me a pound of bread to day, I will give you seventeen ounces on demand, and so on. All that it is necessary for the reader to note is, that the amount returned is at least in equity not to be less than the amount given.

The abstract idea, then, of just or due wages, as respects the labourer, is that they will consist in a sum of money which will at any time procure for him at least as much labour as he has given, rather more than less. And this equity or justice of payment is, observe, wholly independent of any reference to the number of men who are willing to do the work. I want a horseshoe for my horse. Twenty smiths, or twenty thousand smiths, may be ready to forge it; their number does not in one atom's weight affect the question of the equitable payment of the one who does forge it. It costs him a quarter of an hour of his life, and so much skill and strength of arm to make that horseshoe for me. Then at some future time I am bound in equity to give a quarter of an hour, and some minutes more, of my life (or of some other person's at my disposal), and also as much strength of arm and skill, and a little more, in making or doing what the smith may have need of.

▲5 Such being the abstract theory of just remunerative payment, its application is practically modified by the fact that the order for labour, given in payment, is general, while labour received is special. The current coin or document is practically an order on the nation for so much work of any kind; and this universal applicability to immediate need renders it so much more valuable than special labour can be, that an order for a less quantity of this general toil will always be accepted as a just equivalent for a greater quantity of special toil. Any given craftsman will always be willing to give an hour of his own work in order to receive command over half-an-hour, or even much less, of national work. This source of uncertainty, together, with the difficulty of determining the monetary value of skill,⁷ renders the ascertainment (even approximate) of the proper wages of any given labour in terms of a currency matter of considerable complexity. But they do not affect the principle of exchange. The worth of the work may not be easily known; but it has a worth, just as fixed and real as the specific gravity of a substance, though such specific gravity may not be easily ascertainable when the substance is united with many others. Nor is there so much difficulty or chance in determining it as in determining the ordinary maxima and minima of vulgar political economy. There are few bargains in which the buyer can ascertain with anything like precision that the seller would have taken no less; —or the seller acquire more than a comfortable faith that the purchaser would have given no more. This impossibility of precise knowledge prevents neither from striving to attain the desired point of greatest vexation and injury to the other, nor from accepting it for a scientific principle that he is to buy for the least and sell for the most possible, though what the real least or most may be he cannot tell. In like manner, a just person lays it down

for a scientific principle that he is to pay a just price, and, without being able precisely to ascertain the limits of such a price, will nevertheless strive to attain the closest possible approximation to them. A practically serviceable approximation he can obtain. It is easier to determine scientifically what a man ought to have for his work, than what his necessities will compel him to take for it. His necessities can only be ascertained by empirical, but his due by analytical, investigation. In the one case, you try your answer to the sum like a puzzled schoolboy—till you find one that fits; in the other, you bring out your result within certain limits, by process of calculation. (49)

Just wages (Ch3 Sec3)

[text»](#)

▲2

Ruskin footnote 6—the exchangeable value of labor

It might appear at first that the market price of labour expressed such an exchange: but this is a fallacy, for the market price is the momentary price of the kind of labour required, but the just price is its equivalent of the productive labour of mankind. This difference will be analyzed in its place. It must be noted also that I speak here only of the exchangeable value of labour, not of that of commodities. The exchangeable value of a commodity is that of the labour required to produce it, multiplied into the force of the demand for it. If the value of the labour = x and the force of demand = y , the exchangeable value of the commodity is xy , in which if either $x = 0$, or $y = 0$, $xy = 0$. [Back](#)

▲5

“national work”

Here, especially in this discussion of “national work,” Ruskin addresses an apparent disconnect in his idea that the wages we pay a workman for an hour's work should be equivalent to an hour of our own work. Ruskin knows that different occupations have different wages, and so one person will be able to pay another with fewer hours of his or her labor. National work seems to be a means of reconciling that difference. See also Ruskin's footnote 8.

Ruskin footnote 7—skill includes intellect and passion

Under the term “skill” I mean to include the united force of experience, intellect, and passion in their operation on manual labour: and under the term “passion,” to include the entire range and agency of the moral feelings; from the simple patience and gentleness of mind which will give continuity and fineness to the touch, or enable one person to work without fatigue, and with good effect, twice as long as another, up to the qualities of character which renders science possible— (the retardation of science by envy is one of the most tremendous losses in the economy of the present century)—and to the incommunicable emotion and imagination which are the first and mightiest sources of all value in art.

It is highly singular that political economists should not yet have perceived, if not the moral, at least the passionate element, to be an inextricable quantity in every calculation. I cannot conceive, for instance, how it was possible that Mr. Mill should have followed the true clue so far as to write, —“No limit can be set to the importance—even in a purely productive and material point of view—of mere thought,” without seeing that it was logically necessary to add also, “and of mere feeling.” And this the more, because in his first definition of labour he includes in the idea of it “all feelings of a disagreeable kind connected with the employment of one's thoughts in a particular occupation.” True; but why not also, “feelings of an agreeable kind?” It can hardly be supposed that the feelings which retard labour are more essentially a part of the labour than those which accelerate it. The first are paid for as pain, the second as power. The workman is merely indemnified for the first; but the second both produce a part of the exchangeable value of the work, and materially increase its actual quantity.

“Fritz is with us. He is worth fifty thousand men.” Truly, a large addition to the material force; — consisting, however, be it observed, not more in operations carried on in Fritz's head, than in operations carried on in his armies' heart. “No limit can be set to the importance of mere thought.” Perhaps not! Nay, suppose some day it should turn out that “mere” thought was in itself a recommendable object of production, and that all Material production was only a step towards this more precious Immaterial one? [Back](#)

TOC

↑ **The destructiveness of unjust wages** Ch3 Sec 4

notes»

1. When you unjustly hire a worker at the low prevailing wage, you can hire a second worker at the same rate—but two workers who sought a higher wage are unemployed.
2. If the worker is hired at a just wage, this worker may now employ another, and so wealth is not concentrated but is distributed through a chain of men.
3. Paying just wages reduces the power of wealth but, more important, it enables workers to rise on the social scale. The current system hinders advancement.
4. The destiny of the working class is tied to this issue. For example, grievances over unjust taxes are more truly grievances over low wages resulting from competition for employment.
5. We do not face an overpopulation problem, but rather oppression (that afflicts the oppressor as well) because we permit competition for jobs to drive down wages.

▲1 Supposing, then, the just wages of any quantity of given labour to have been ascertained, let us examine the first results of just and unjust payment, when in favour of the purchaser or employer; i.e. when two men are ready to do the work, and only one wants to have it done. (50)

The unjust purchaser forces the two to bid against each other till he has reduced their demand to its lowest terms. Let us assume that the lowest bidder offers to do the work at half its just price.

The purchaser employs him, and does not employ the other. The first or apparent result is, therefore, that one of the two men is left out of employ, or to starvation, just as definitely as by the just procedure of giving fair price to the best workman. The various writers who endeavoured to invalidate the positions of my first paper never saw this, and assumed that the unjust hirer employed both. He employs both no more than the just hirer. The only difference (in the outset) is that the just man pays sufficiently, the unjust man insufficiently, for the labour of the single person employed.

I say, “in the outset;” for this first or apparent, difference is not the actual difference. By the unjust procedure, half the proper price of the work is left in the hands of the employer. This enables him to hire another man at the same unjust rate, on some other kind of work; and the final result is that he has two men working for him at half price, and two are out of employ.

▲2 By the just procedure, the whole price of the first piece of work goes in the hands of the man who does it. No surplus being left in the employer's hands, he cannot hire another man for another piece of labour. But by precisely so much as his power is diminished, the hired workman's power is increased; that is to say, by the additional half of the price he has received; which additional half he has the power of using to employ another man in his service. I will suppose, for the moment, the least favourable, though quite probable, case—that, though justly treated himself, he yet will act unjustly to his subordinate; and hire at half-price, if he can. The final result will then be, that one

man works for the employer, at just price; one for the workman, at half-price; and two, as in the first case, are still out of employ. These two, as I said before, are out of employ in both cases. The difference between the just and unjust procedure does not lie in the number of men hired, but in the price paid to them, and the persons by whom it is paid. The essential difference, that which I want the reader to see clearly, is, that in the unjust case, two men work for one, the first hirer. In the just case, one man works for the first hirer, one for the person hired, and so on, down or up through the various grades of service; the influence being carried forward by justice, and arrested by injustice. The universal and constant action of justice in this matter is therefore to diminish the power of wealth, in the hands of one individual, over masses of men, and to distribute it through a chain of men. The actual power exerted by the wealth is the same in both cases; but by injustice it is put all into one man's hands, so that he directs at once and with equal force the labour of a circle of men about him; by the just procedure, he is permitted to touch the nearest only, through whom, with diminished force, modified by new minds, the energy of the wealth passes on to others, and so till it exhausts itself. (51)

▲3 The immediate operation of justice in this respect is therefore to diminish the power of wealth, first in acquisition of luxury, and, secondly, in exercise of moral influence. The employer cannot concentrate so multitudinous labour on his own interests, nor can he subdue so multitudinous mind to his own will. But the secondary operation of justice is not less important. The insufficient payment of the group of men working for one, places each under a maximum of difficulty in rising above his position. The tendency of the system is to check advancement. But the sufficient or just payment, distributed through a descending series of offices or grades of labour,⁸ gives each subordinated person fair and sufficient means of rising in the social scale, if he chooses to use them; and thus not only diminishes the immediate power of wealth, but removes the worst disabilities of poverty. (52)

▲4 It is on this vital problem that the entire destiny of the labourer is ultimately dependent. Many minor interests may sometimes appear to interfere with it, but all branch from it. For instance, considerable agitation is often caused in the minds of the lower classes when they discover the share which they nominally, and to all appearance, actually, pay out of their wages in taxation (I believe thirty-five or forty per cent). This sounds very grievous; but in reality the labourer does not pay it, but his employer. If the workman had not to pay it, his wages would be less by just that sum: competition would still reduce them to the lowest rate at which life was possible. Similarly the lower orders agitated for the repeal of the corn laws,⁹ thinking they would be better off if bread were cheaper; never perceiving that as soon as bread was permanently cheaper, wages would permanently fall in precisely that proportion. The corn laws were rightly repealed; not, however, because they directly oppressed the poor, but because they indirectly oppressed them in causing a large quantity of their labour to be consumed unproductively. So also unnecessary taxation oppresses them, through destruction of capital, but the destiny of the poor depends primarily always on this one question of dueness of wages. Their distress (irrespectively of that caused by sloth, minor error, or crime) arises on the grand scale from the two reacting forces of competition and oppression. ▲5 There is not yet, nor will yet for ages be, any real over-population in the world; but a local over-population, or, more accurately, a degree of population locally unmanageable under existing circumstances for want of forethought and sufficient machinery, necessarily shows itself by pressure of competition; and the taking advantage of this competition by the purchaser to obtain their labour unjustly cheap, consummates at once their suffering and his own; for in this (as I believe in every other kind of slavery) the oppressor suffers at last more than the oppressed, and those magnificent lines of Pope, even in all their force, fall short of the truth —

“Yet, to be just to these poor men of pelf,
Each does but HATE HIS NEIGHBOUR AS HIMSELF:

Damned to the mines, an equal fate betides
The slave that digs it, and the slave that hides." (53)

The collateral and reversionary operations of justice in this matter I shall examine hereafter (it being needful first to define the nature of value); proceeding then to consider within what practical terms a juster system may be established; and ultimately the vexed question of the destinies of the unemployed workmen.¹⁰ Lest, however, the reader should be alarmed at some of the issues to which our investigations seem to be tending, as if in their bearing against the power of wealth they had something in common with those of socialism, I wish him to know in accurate terms, one or two of the main points which I have in view. (54)

The destructiveness of unjust wages (Ch3 Sec4)

[text»](#)

▲3

Ruskin's note 8—payment shall be distributed by grades of labor

I am sorry to lose time by answering, however curtly, the equivocations of the writers who sought to obscure the instances given of regulated labour in the first of these papers, by confusing kinds, ranks, and quantities of labour with its qualities. I never said that a colonel should have the same pay as a private, nor a bishop the same pay as a curate. Neither did I say that more work ought to be paid as less work (so that the curate of a parish of two thousand souls should have no more than the curate of a parish of five hundred). But I said that, so far as you employ it at all, bad work should be paid no less than good work; as a bad clergyman yet takes his tithes, a bad physician takes his fee, and a bad lawyer his costs. And this, as will be farther shown in the conclusion, I said, and say, partly because the best work never was, nor ever will be, done for money at all; but chiefly because, the moment people know they have to pay the bad and good alike, they will try to discern the one from the other, and not use the bad. A sagacious writer in the Scotsman asks me if I should like any common scribbler to be paid by Messrs. Smith, Elder and Co. as their good authors are. I should, if they employed him—but would seriously recommend them, for the scribbler's sake, as well as their own, not to employ him. The quantity of its money which the country at present invests in scribbling is not, in the outcome of it, economically spent; and even the highly ingenious person to whom this question occurred, might perhaps have been more beneficially employed than in printing it. [Back](#)

▲4

Ruskin's note 9—Fervent support for free trade

Here Ruskin declares himself to be a fervent supporter of free trade, and he presents his argument.

I have to acknowledge an interesting communication on the subject of free trade from Paisley (for a short letter from "A Well-wisher" at my thanks are yet more due). But the Scottish writer will, I fear, be disagreeably surprised to hear, that I am, and always have been, an utterly fearless and unscrupulous free-trader. Seven years ago, speaking of the various signs of infancy in the European mind (*Stones of Venice*, vol. iii. p. 168), I wrote: "The first principles of commerce were acknowledged by the English parliament only a few months ago, in its free-trade measures, and are still so little understood by the million, that no nation dares to abolish its custom-houses."

It will be observed that I do not admit even the idea of reciprocity. Let other nations, if they like, keep their ports shut; every wise nation will throw its own open. It is not the opening them, but a sudden, inconsiderate, and blunderingly experimental manner of opening them, which does the harm. If you have been protecting a manufacture for a long series of years, you must not take the protection off in a moment, so as to throw every one of its operatives at once out of employ, any more than you must take all its wrappings off a feeble child at once in cold weather, though the cumber of them may have been radically injuring its health. Little by little, you must restore it to freedom and to air. [Back](#)

Most people's minds are in curious confusion on the subject of free trade, because they suppose it to imply enlarged competition. On the contrary, free trade puts an end to all competition. "Protection" (among various other mischievous functions,) endeavours to enable one country to compete with another in the production of an article at a disadvantage. When trade is entirely free, no country can be competed with in the articles for the production of which it is naturally calculated; nor can it compete with any other, in the production of articles for which it is not naturally calculated. Tuscany, for instance, cannot compete with England in steel, nor England with Tuscany in oil. They must exchange their steel and oil. Which exchange should be as frank and free as honesty and the sea-winds can make it. Competition, indeed, arises at first, and sharply, in order to prove which is strongest in any given manufacture possible to both; this point once ascertained, competition is at an end.

Quotation from Pope ("Moral Essays," Epistle III)

Misers (who hide their gold and won't spend it) don't just hate their neighbors. They hate themselves. Pope's satirical poem is about the abuse of riches.

▲ 5

Ruskin's note 10—what we mean by employment. Everyone should work.

See below where Ruskin suggests that rich people need to do more work. Teaching at Oxford, Ruskin had his students mend local roads. Ruskin, in general, has no sympathy for people who are idle or lazy.

I should be glad if the reader would first clear the ground for himself so far as to determine whether the difficulty lies in getting the work or getting the pay for it. Does he consider occupation itself to be an expensive luxury, difficult of attainment, of which too little is to be found in the world? or is it rather that, while in the enjoyment even of the most athletic delight, men must nevertheless be maintained, and this maintenance is not always forthcoming? We must be clear on this head before going farther, as most people are loosely in the habit of talking of the difficulty of "finding employment." Is it employment that we want to find, or support during employment? Is it idleness we wish to put an end to, or hunger? We have to take up both questions in succession, only not both at the same time. No doubt that work is a luxury, and a very great one. It is, indeed, at once a luxury and a necessity; no man can retain either health of mind or body without it. So profoundly do I feel this, that, as will be seen in the sequel, one of the principal objects I would recommend to benevolent and practical persons, is to induce rich people to seek for a larger quantity of this luxury than they at present possess. Nevertheless, it appears by experience that even this healthiest of pleasures may be indulged in to excess, and that human beings are just as liable to surfeit of labour as to surfeit of meat; so that, as on the one hand, it may be charitable to provide, for some people, lighter dinner, and more work, for others, it may be equally expedient to provide lighter work, and more dinner. [Back](#)

↑ **The impossibility of equality. The evil of worshipping riches.** Ch3 Sec 5

notes»

1. I insist on the impossibility of equality among men. Some men will always be superior to others.
2. In fact, it may be best for one man to lead all others and, perhaps, even to subdue all others. We must have government and cooperation, not anarchy and competition.
3. Property must be held securely. The poor have no right to it. Neither should the rich steal from the poor.
4. My social program would lessen the power of wealth. The attraction of riches is already too strong.
5. Our acceptance of political economy is a disgrace: A key reason is that this worship of Mammon violates our professed religion.

▲1 Whether socialism has made more progress among the army and navy (where payment is made on my principles), or among the manufacturing operatives (who are paid on my opponents' principles), I leave it to those opponents to ascertain and declare. Whatever their conclusion may be, I think it necessary to answer for myself only this: that if there be any one point insisted on throughout my works more frequently than another, that one point is the impossibility of Equality. My continual aim has been to show the eternal superiority of some men to others, ▲2 sometimes even of one man to all others; and to show also the advisability of appointing such persons or person to guide, to lead, or on occasion even to compel and subdue, their inferiors, according to their own better knowledge and wiser will. My principles of Political Economy were all involved in a single phrase spoken three years ago at Manchester. "Soldiers of the Ploughshare as well as soldiers of the Sword:" and they were all summed in a single sentence in the last volume of Modern Painters— "Government and co-operation are in all things the Laws of Life; Anarchy and competition the Laws of Death."

▲3 And with respect to the mode in which these general principles affect the secure possession of property, so far am I from invalidating such security, that the whole gist of these papers will be found ultimately to aim at an extension in its range; and whereas it has long been known and declared that the poor have no right to the property of the rich, I wish it also to be known and declared that the rich have no right to the property of the poor.

▲4 But that the working of the system which I have undertaken to develop would in many ways shorten the apparent and direct, though not the unseen and collateral, power, both of wealth, as the Lady of Pleasure, and of capital as the Lord of Toil, I do not deny on the contrary, I affirm it in all joyfulness; knowing that the attraction of riches is already too strong, as their authority is already too weighty, for the reason of mankind. I said in my last paper that ▲5 nothing in history had ever been so disgraceful to human intellect as the acceptance among us of the common doctrines of political economy as a science. I have many grounds for saying this, but one of the chief may be given in few words. I know no previous instance in history of a nation's establishing a systematic disobedience to the first principles of its professed religion. The writings which we (verbally) esteem as divine, not only denounce the love of money as the source of all evil, and as an idolatry abhorred of the Deity, but declare mammon service to be the accurate and irreconcilable opposite of God's service: and, whenever they speak of riches absolute, and poverty absolute, declare woe to the rich, and blessing to the poor. Where upon we forthwith investigate a science of becoming rich as the shortest road to national prosperity.

“Tai Cristian dannerà l' Etiòpe,
 Quando si partiranno i due collegi,
 L'UNO IN ETERNO RICCO, E L'ALTRO INÒPE.”
 (55)

The impossibility of equality. The evil of worshipping riches. (Ch3 Sec5)

[text»](#)

▲2

“on occasion even to compel and subdue, their inferiors”

This is a profoundly anti-democratic statement.

▲3

“the rich have no right to the property of the poor”

This sentence begins with Ruskin strongly supporting the wealthy against the political radicals who would redistribute wealth. But, then, is a surprising reversal, Ruskin strongly suggests that the wealthy have accumulated their wealth by stealing from the poor.

▲5

Ruskin returns to the theme, introduced in Chapter 1, that the fundamental principles of political economy directly contradict Christian beliefs.

▲6

“Tai Cristian dannerà l' Etiòpe . . . ”

This is a quotation from Dante's *Paradiso* (xix, 109). The idea is that some heathens are more righteous than some Christians, and that God will prefer righteous heathens than insincere Christians.

“Christians like these the Aethiop shall condemn:
 When that the two assemblages shall part;
 One rich eternally, the other poor.”

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Ch. 4 Ad Valorem

SECTIONS

1. Mill is inconsistent, but admirably so, in defining produce
2. What then is "Value"?
3. David Ricardo's political economy offers no way to understand value
4. Value is what enhances human life. It is inherent to each thing.
5. What is wealth?
6. Understanding wealth and character
7. The nature of Price, the value of exchange expressed by currency
8. Just and unjust exchange
9. Labor
10. Labor and production

11. Capital
12. The consideration of population growth
13. Economists propose false remedies for over-population
14. How we should live on the land
15. Let our consumption of goods be equitable and our lives be a force for good

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↑ **Mill is inconsistent, but admirably so, in defining produce** Ch4 Sec 1

notes»

1. We will examine the definitions of Value, Wealth, Price, and Produce, starting with Produce.
2. Mill shows us a manufacturer of hardware (utensils) who—instead of buying silver plate and jewels—hires more workman.
3. But why does Mill believe that utensils are produce (productive goods) and silverware is not? And what about producing bayonets?
4. Mill, in fact, is inconsistent with his economic theory, and yet, admirable, in making moral judgements about the value of various kinds of produce.

▲1 We saw that just payment of labour consisted in a sum of money which would approximately obtain equivalent labour at a future time: we have now to examine the means of obtaining such equivalence. Which question involves the definition of Value, Wealth, Price, and Produce. (56)

None of these terms are yet defined so as to be understood by the public. But the last, Produce, which one might have thought the clearest of all, is, in use, the most ambiguous; and the examination of the kind of ambiguity attendant on its present employment will best open the way to our work.

▲2 In his chapter on Capital¹ Mr. J.S. Mill instances, as a capitalist, a hardware manufacturer, who, having intended to spend a certain portion of the proceeds of his business in buying plate and jewels, changes his mind, and, “pays it as wages to additional workpeople.” The effect is stated by Mr. Mill to be, that “more food is appropriated to the consumption of productive labourers.”

Now I do not ask, though, had I written this paragraph, it would surely have been asked of me, What is to become of the silversmiths? If they are truly unproductive persons, we will acquiesce in their extinction. And though in another part of the same passage, the hardware merchant is supposed also to dispense with a number of servants, whose “food is thus set free for productive purposes,” I do not inquire what will be the effect, painful or otherwise, upon the servants, of this emancipation of their food. ▲3 But I very seriously inquire why ironware is produce, and silverware is not? That the merchant consumes the one, and sells the other, certainly does not constitute the difference, unless it can be shown (which, indeed, I perceive it to be becoming daily more and more the aim of tradesmen to show) that commodities are made to be sold, and not to be consumed. The merchant is an agent of conveyance to the consumer in one case, and is himself the

consumer in the other:² but the labourers are in either case equally productive, since they have produced goods to the same value, if the hardware and the plate are both goods. (57)

And what distinction separates them? It is indeed possible that in the “comparative estimate of the moralist,” with which Mr. Mill says political economy has nothing to do (III. I. 2), a steel fork might appear a more substantial production than a silver one: we may grant also that knives, no less than forks, are good produce; and scythes and ploughshares serviceable articles. But, how of bayonets? Supposing the hardware merchant to effect large sales of these, by help of the “setting free” of the food of his servants and his silversmith, —is he still employing productive labourers, or, in Mr. Mill's words, labourers who increase “the stock of permanent means of enjoyment” (I. iii. 4)? Or if, instead of bayonets, he supply bombs, will not the absolute and final “enjoyment” of even these energetically productive articles (each of which costs ten pounds³) be dependent on a proper choice of time and place for their *enfantement*; choice, that is to say, depending on those philosophical considerations with which political economy has nothing to do?⁴

▲ 4 I should have regretted the need of pointing out inconsistency in any portion of Mr. Mill's work, had not the value of his work proceeded from its inconsistencies. He deserves honour among economists by inadvertently disclaiming the principles which he states, and tacitly introducing the moral considerations with which he declares his science has no connection. Many of his chapters are, therefore, true and valuable; and the only conclusions of his which I have to dispute are those which follow from his premises. (58)

Thus, the idea which lies at the root of the passage we have just been examining, namely, that labour applied to produce luxuries will not support so many persons as labour applied to produce useful articles, is entirely true; but the instance given fails—and in four directions of failure at once—because Mr. Mill has not defined the real meaning of usefulness. The definition which he has given—“capacity to satisfy a desire, or serve a purpose” (III. i. 2)—applies equally to the iron and silver. while the true definition which he has not given, but which nevertheless underlies the false verbal definition in his mind, and comes out once or twice by accident (as in the words “any support to life or strength” in I. iii. 5)—applies to some articles of iron, but not to others, and to some articles of silver, but not to others. It applies to ploughs, but not to bayonets; and to forks, but not to filigree.⁵

Notes for Chapter 4

text»

Chapter Summary

Broadly speaking this essay is organized as an examination and redefinition of the key economic terms value, wealth, and price, and produce (“production”), but the economic terms exchange, labor, and capital are considered as well, and Ruskin turns to the issues of over-population and the environment before concluding this essay (and the book) by focusing on the individual household.

As a preliminary, Ruskin shows that Mill's definition of produce is erroneous. Then value is redefined that which enhances life, not what something sells for in the marketplace. Wealth must be understood in regard to the nature of the goods that are produced, how adequately they are distributed throughout society, and how well these goods can be used. Many men possess great riches, but these riches do not function as true wealth. Ruskin's discussion of price encompasses exchange value and labor. No profit can come from exchange. It is inherently exploitive. Labor is discussed as a means to understand production. Good production comes from good forms of labor and requires good consumption. Capital should be spent to achieve good production (which is finally good consumption), not just the accumulation of more capital.

Ruskin is appalled by economists who use the fear of over-population to deny social justice. We can sustain a growing population through wise action, not cruelty. We will protect the environment because we need croplands to eat and because people instinctively value natural beauty. We will create a better world not by public effort but by individual action, and Ruskin describes a simple, wholesome, healthy, and moral way to live our lives.

The title of this chapter: “Ad Valorem”

“Ad Valorem” is a business term pertaining to taxes. You are taxed “Ad valorem,” according to the value of your goods. Ruskin, however, redefines “value” in a totally different, much broader way. So, in Ruskin's context, the title might be translated “toward better understanding the value of things.”

Greater length of this chapter

This essay is much longer than the three preceding essays. The editor of Cornhill Magazine, William Makepeace Thackeray, responding to the hostile response to Ruskin's essays, told Ruskin that the fourth essay would be the last. Thackeray, however, did allow Ruskin to publish a longer essay than the previous ones, and so Ruskin condenses the four essays he was planning into this one. In Ruskin's footnote 6, he gives the titles of the canceled essays.

Mill is inconsistent, but admirably so, in defining produce (Ch4 Sec1)

text»

Ruskin's representation of Mill's thinking

Mill actually uses “productive” in the context of capitalist investment and means only that productive labor contributes to further production. Mill does not truly mean that unproductive goods, such as silver plate, and the unproductive labor that yields unproductive good are without value. Ruskin, therefore, does not represent Mill accurately here. Ruskin's real interest, to which he moves quickly, is to make distinctions about the ultimate usefulness to society of what is produced. So, while a capitalist may not distinguish between ploughshares and bayonets, Ruskin certainly does. (see [Fain](#), pages 135 and following.)

▲ #2

Ruskin footnote 1—How he will cite Mill's *Principles of Political Economy*

Ruskin states that will be quoting from the first edition of Mill's *Principles of Political Economy*, published in two volumes by John W. Parker in 1848, and he will be citing passages by book number, chapter number, and section number, numbers such as these: I. iv. 1.

Book I. chap. iv. s. 1. To save space, my future references to Mr. Mill's work will be by numerals only, as in this instance, I. iv. I. Ed. in 2 vols. 8vo. Parker, 1848. [Back](#)

“food is thus set free for productive purposes,”

This is one of many instances of Ruskin's use of satire (somewhat in the manner of Jonathan Swift). If, as Ruskin imagines, the business owner dismisses some of his servants, the consequence, in their view, is not that their food is being set free for productive purposes.

Ruskin footnote 2—Ruskin modifies and again refutes Mill's argument

If Mr. Mill had wished to show the difference in result between consumption and sale, he should have represented the hardware merchant as consuming his own goods instead of selling them; similarly, the silver merchant as consuming his own goods instead of welling them. Had he done this, he would have made his position clearer, though less tenable; and perhaps this was the position he really intended to take, tacitly involving his theory, elsewhere stated, and shown in the sequel of this paper to be false, that demand for commodities is not demand for labour. But by the most diligent scrutiny of the paragraph now under examination, I cannot determine whether it is a fallacy pure and simple, or the half of one fallacy supported by the whole of a greater one; so that I treat it here on the kinder assumption that it is one fallacy only. [Back](#)

Ruskin footnote 3—the cost of a bomb

In Ruskin's era, long before military aircraft, “bomb” means an explosive cannon shell, as in “bombard.” I take Mr. Helps' estimate in his essay on War. [Back](#)

Ruskin footnote 4—the value of silver vases and other kinds of produce

Also when the wrought silver vases of Spain were dashed to fragments by our custom-house officers, because bullion might be imported free of duty, but not brains, was the axe that broke them productive? —the artist who wrought them unproductive? Or again. If the woodman's axe is productive, is the executioner's? as also, if the hemp of a cable be productive, does not the productiveness of hemp in a halter depend on its moral more than on its material application? [Back](#)

▲5

Ruskin footnote 5—the meaning of filigree

Filigree: that is to say, generally, ornament dependent on complexity, not on art. [Back](#)

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↑ **What then is "Value"?** Ch4 Sec 2

[notes»](#)

1. In political economy value is value in exchange, and value is just what people will pay for.
2. Therefore, political economy excludes moral considerations—a view I reject.

▲1 The eliciting of the true definitions will give us the reply to our first question, “What is value?” respecting which, however, we must first hear the popular statements. (59)

“The word ‘value,’ when used without adjunct, always means, in political economy, value in exchange” (Mill, III. i. 2). So that, if two ships cannot exchange their rudders, their rudders are, in politico-economic language, of no value to either.

But “the subject of political economy is wealth.” — (Preliminary remarks, page 1)

And wealth “consists of all useful and agreeable objects which possess exchangeable value.” — (Preliminary remarks, page 10.)

It appears, then, according to Mr. Mill, that usefulness and agreeableness underlie the exchange value, and must be ascertained to exist in the thing, before we can esteem it an object of wealth.

Now, the economical usefulness of a thing depends not merely on its own nature, but on the number of people who can and will use it. A horse is useless, and therefore unsaleable, if no one can ride, —a sword, if no one can strike, and meat, if no one can eat. Thus every material utility depends on its relative human capacity.

Similarly: The agreeableness of a thing depends not merely on its own likeableness, but on the number of people who can be got to like it. The relative agreeableness, and therefore saleableness, of “a pot of the smallest ale,” and of “Adonis painted by a running brook,” depends virtually on the opinion of Demos, in the shape of Christopher Sly. That is to say, the agreeableness of a thing depends on its relatively human disposition.⁶ Therefore, political economy, being a science of wealth, must be a science respecting human capacities and dispositions.▲2 But moral considerations have nothing to do with political economy (III. i. 2). Therefore, moral considerations have nothing to do with human capacities and dispositions.

I do not wholly like the look of this conclusion from Mr. Mill's statements: —let us try Mr. Ricardo's. (60)

What then is "Value"? (Ch4 Sec2)

[text»](#)

Overview

Ruskin is clearing the way for his definition of value by attacking the definitions offered by political economists, here Mill and Ricardo. Underlying Ruskin's complex argument against Mill is the idea that the concepts of value and wealth in orthodox political economy lack a moral dimension. Ruskin will insist on much broader and humanistic definitions of value and wealth.

▲1

“Demos in the shape of Christopher Sly”

Ruskin is saying that political economists regard value as what is valued by average people (“demos”), which Ruskin here represents as the drunken peddler in Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*. Ruskin agrees that usefulness depends on what people value but, in contrast to orthodox political economy, he sees political economy as part of a larger societal endeavor that must create people who are sufficiently healthy and educated and who have sufficient leisure time enough to value and use the best things, the things that make for a noble, happy life. In brief, Ruskin's economics are deeply imbued with both a moral imperative and judgements about what makes for good and bad living. This position is fully expressed in Section 4. For valuable commentary, see [Fain](#), p. 78.

Ruskin footnote 6—“the agreeableness of a thing” and the canceled essays

Ruskin is showing that economists focus too narrowly on wealth and don't consider how money is put to use. In addition, Ruskin names the three never-published essays that he needed to combine into this one because *Cornhill Magazine* terminated his series of essays.

These statements sound crude in their brevity; but will be found of the utmost importance when they are developed. Thus, in the above instance, economists have never perceived that disposition to buy is a wholly moral element in demand: that is to say, when you give a man half-a-crown, it depends on his disposition whether he is rich or poor with it—whether he will buy disease, ruin, and hatred, or buy health, advancement, and domestic love. And thus the agreeableness or exchange value of every offered commodity depends on production, not merely of the commodity, but of buyers of it; therefore on the education of buyers, and on all the moral elements by which their disposition to buy this, or that, is formed. I will illustrate and expand into final consequences every one of these definitions in its place: at present they can only be given with extremest brevity; for in order to put the subject at once in a connected form before the reader, I have thrown into one, the opening definitions of four chapters; namely, of that on Value (“Ad Valorem”); on Price (“Thirty Pieces”); on Production (“Demeter”); and on Economy (“The Law of the House”). [Back](#)

▲2

“Therefore, moral conditions have nothing to do with human capacities and dispositions”

Ruskin's strategy is to show that the various components of Mill's thinking lead to this impossible statement and are therefore contradictory.

↑ David Ricardo's political economy offers no way to understand value

Ch4 Sec 3

notes»

1. Ricardo says that utility is essential to exchangeable value. But what level of quality is required for there to be value?
2. If a hunter's bow and arrow and the fisherman's implements have equal value and the men put forth equal labor, then the produce of each must be the same regardless of what is caught—Really?
3. Even if we take the average productivity of the fisherman and of the hunter, this reasoning makes no sense, so I move on to find a true definition of value.

▲1 "Utility is not the measure of exchangeable value, though it is absolutely essential to it." — (Chap. I. sect. i) essential in what degree, Mr. Ricardo? There may be greater and less degrees of utility. Meat, for instance, may be so good as to be fit for any one to eat, or so bad as to be fit for no one to eat. What is the exact degree of goodness which is "essential" to its exchangeable value, but not "the measure" of it? How good must the meat be, in order to possess any exchangeable value; and how bad must it be—(I wish this were a settled question in London markets)—in order to possess none?

▲2 There appears to be some hitch, I think, in the working even of Mr. Ricardo's principles; but let him take his own example. —Suppose that in the early stages of society the bows and arrows of the hunter were of equal value with the implements of the fisherman. Under such circumstances the value of the deer, the produce of the hunter's day's labour, would be exactly equal to the value of the fish, the product of the fisherman's day's labour, The comparative value of the fish and game would be entirely regulated by the quantity of labour realized in each." (Ricardo, chap. iii. On Value).

Indeed! Therefore, if the fisherman catches one sprat. and the huntsman one deer, one sprat will be equal in value to one deer but if the fisherman catches no sprat, and the huntsman two deer, no sprat will be equal in value to two deer?

▲3 Nay but—Mr. Ricardo's supporters may say—he means, on an average, —if the average product of a day's work of fisher and hunter be one fish and one deer, the one fish will always be equal in value to the one deer

Might I inquire the species of fish? Whale? or white-bait?⁷

It would be waste of time to purpose these fallacies farther; we will seek for a true definition.

David Ricardo's political economy offers no way to understand value (Ch4 Sec3)

[text»](#)

Note on this section

Ruskin's objection to Ricardo is that Ricardo's idea of value is narrow (quantity of labor) and is only loosely connected to utility. To Ruskin value is equivalent to utility, and both value and utility are measures of the betterment of human life. Also, value doesn't vary with demand. It is "independent of opinion and quantity." See [Fain](#), p. 46, and [Yarker's](#) edition of *Unto This Last*, p. 159.

▲3

Ruskin footnote 7—Ruskin modifies and again refutes Ricardo's argument

Perhaps it may be said, in farther support of Mr. Ricardo, that he meant, "when the utility is constant or given, the price varies as the quantity of

labour." If he meant this, he should have said it; but, had he meant it, he could have hardly missed the necessary result, that utility would be one measure of price (which he expressly denies it to be); and that, to prove saleableness, he had to prove a given quantity of utility, as well as a given quantity of labour: to wit, in his own instance, that the deer and fish would each feed the same number of men, for the same number of days, with equal pleasure to their palates. The fact is, he did not know what he meant himself. The general idea which he had derived from commercial experience, without being able to analyze it, was, that when the demand is constant, the price varies as the quantity of labour required for production; or, —using the formula I gave in last paper—when y is constant, x y varies as x . But demand never is, nor can be, ultimately constant, if x varies distinctly; for, as price rises, consumers fall away; and as soon as there is a monopoly (and all scarcity is a form of monopoly; so that every commodity is affected occasionally by some colour of monopoly), y becomes the most influential condition of the price. Thus the price of a painting depends less on its merits than on the interest taken in it by the public; the price of singing less on the labour of the singer than the number of persons who desire to hear him; and the price of gold less on the scarcity which affects it in common with cerium or iridium, than on the sunlight colour and unalterable purity by which it attracts the admiration and answers the trust of mankind.

It must be kept in mind, however, that I use the word "demand" in a somewhat different sense from economists usually. They mean by it "the quantity of a thing sold." I mean by it "the force of the buyer's capable intention to buy." In good English, a person's "demand" signifies, not what he gets, but what he asks for.

Economists also do not notice that objects are not valued by absolute bulk or weight, but by such bulk and weight as is necessary to bring them into use. They say, for instance, that water bears no price in the market. It is true that a cupful does not, but a lake does; just as a handful of dust does not, but an acre does. And were it possible to make even the possession of the cupful or handful permanent, (i.e. to find a place for them,) the earth and sea would be bought up for handfuls and cupfuls. [Back](#)

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↑ **Value is what enhances human life. It is inherent to each thing.** Ch4 Sec 4

notes»

1. The etymology of “value” is “strength for living.” It is related to “valor” and “valiant.”
2. Value is independent of people’s opinions and of availability (quantity). Rather it comes from God.
3. The real science of political economy is that which teaches nations to desire and labour for the things that lead to life. Primitive societies must learn this.

▲1 Much store has been set for centuries upon the use of our English classical education. It were to be wished that our well-educated merchants recalled to mind always this much of their Latin schooling, —that the nominative of valorem (a word already sufficiently familiar to them) is valor; a word which, therefore, ought to be familiar to them. Valor, from valere, to be well or strong ὑγιαίνω ; —strong, *in* life (if a man), or valiant; strong, *for* life (if a thing), or valuable. To be “valuable,” therefore, is to “avail towards life.” A truly valuable or availing thing is that which leads to life with its whole strength. In proportion as it does not lead to life, or as its strength is broken, it is less valuable; in proportion as it leads away from life, it is unvaluable or malignant. (61)

▲2 The value of a thing, therefore, is independent of opinion, and of quantity. Think what you will of it, gain how much you may of it, the value of the thing itself is neither greater nor less. For ever it avails, or avails not; no estimate can raise, no disdain repress, the power which it holds from the Maker of things and of men.

▲3 The real science of political economy, which has yet to be distinguished from the bastard science, as medicine from witchcraft, and astronomy from astrology, is that which teaches nations to desire and labour for the things that lead to life: and which teaches them to scorn and destroy the things that lead to destruction. And if, in a state of infancy, they supposed indifferent things, such as excrescences of shell-fish, and pieces of blue and red stone, to be valuable, and spent large measures of the labour which ought to be employed for the extension and ennobling of life, in diving or digging for them, and cutting them into various shapes, or if, in the same state of infancy, they imagine precious and beneficent things, such as air, light, and cleanliness, to be valueless, —or if, finally, they imagine the conditions of their own existence, by which alone they can truly possess or use anything, such, for instance, as peace, trust, and love, to be prudently exchangeable, when the markets offer, for gold, iron, or excrescences of shells—the great and only science of Political Economy teaches them, in all these cases, what is vanity, and what substance; and how the service of Death, the lord of Waste, and of eternal emptiness, differs from the service of Wisdom, the lady of Saving, and of eternal fulness; she who has said, “I will cause those that love me to inherit SUBSTANCE; and I will FILL their treasures.”

The “Lady of Saving,” in a profounder sense than that of the savings bank, though that is a good one: Madonna della Salute,—Lady of Health, —which, though commonly spoken of as if separate from wealth, is indeed a part of wealth. This word, “wealth,” it will be remembered, is the next we have to define.

Value is what enhances human life. It is inherent to each thing. (Ch4 Sec4)

[text»](#)

▲ 1

“valorem” . . . “valor”

Ruskin's little joke is that businessmen know “valorem” (the accusative form of the noun “valor”) as term pertaining to taxes. Therefore, they should know “valor” (the nominative form).

▲ 2

“The value of a thing . . . is independent of opinion”

The value of a thing is independent of opinion. However, people need to develop the human capacity to be able to appreciate and make good use things of inherent value.

▲ 3

“I will cause those that love me . . . ” (Proverbs 8:21)

“Madonna della Salute”

Santa Maria della Salute (Saint Mary of Health) is a church in Venice.

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↑ **What is wealth?** Ch4 Sec 5

[notes»](#)

1. Mill says wealth is having a large stock of useful articles. OK, but to be precise let's look first at “having” and “useful.”
2. Examples show that “possession” is not an absolute quality and that people have “possessed” gold in strange and destructive ways.
3. The expansion of “useful” to “can use” implies “can,” that wealth must have the capability to do something.
4. “Useful” contrasts with not useful or “abuse.” Wine, for example, is of great use to human life but is also subject to great abuse.
5. We see that to be useful wealth must be something of inherent value that is also put to good use.
6. We can now describe wealth as the “possession of the valuable by the valiant.”
7. Many “wealthy” people (lacking capacity) are incapable of wealth. They are useless like stagnant water or act as impediments or as a destructive force. Their wealth is only “illth.”

▲ 1 “To be wealthy” says Mr. Mill, “is to have a large stock of useful articles.” I accept this definition. Only let us perfectly understand it. My opponents often lament my not giving them enough logic: I fear I must at present use a little more than they will like: but this business of Political Economy is no light one, and we must allow no loose terms in it. (62)

We have, therefore, to ascertain in the above definition, first, what is the meaning of “having,” or the nature of Possession. Then what is the meaning of “useful,” or the nature of Utility.

▲ 2 And first of possession. At the crossing of the transepts of Milan Cathedral has lain, for three hundred years, the embalmed body of St. Carlo Borromeo. It holds a golden crosier, and has a cross of emeralds on its breast. Admitting the crosier and emeralds to be useful articles, is the body to be considered as “having” them? Do they, in the politico-economical sense of property, belong to it? If not, and if we may, therefore, conclude generally that a dead body cannot possess property, what degree and period of animation in the body will render possession possible?

As thus: lately in a wreck of a Californian ship, one of the passengers fastened a belt about him with two hundred pounds of gold in it, with which he was found afterwards at the bottom. Now, as he was sinking—had he the gold? or had the gold him?⁸

And if, instead of sinking him in the sea by its weight, the gold had struck him on the forehead, and thereby caused incurable disease—suppose palsy or insanity, —would the gold in that case have been more a “possession” than in the first? Without pressing the inquiry up through instances of gradually increasing vital power over the gold (which I will, however, give, if they are asked for), I presume the reader will see that possession, or “having,” is not an absolute, but a gradated, power; and consists not only in the quantity or nature of the thing possessed, but also (and in a greater degree) in its suitability to the person possessing it and in his vital power to use it

▲ 3 And our definition of Wealth, expanded, becomes: “The possession of useful articles, which we can use.” This is a very serious change. For wealth, instead of depending merely on a “have” is thus seen to depend on a “can.” Gladiator's death, on a “habet”; but soldier's victory, and State's salvation, on a “quo plurimum posset.” (liv. VII. 6.) And what we reasoned of only as accumulation of material, is seen to demand also accumulation of capacity.

▲ 4 So much for our verb. Next for our adjective. What is the meaning of “useful”? (63)

The inquiry is closely connected with the last. For what is capable of use in the hands of some persons, is capable, in the hands of others, of the opposite of use, called commonly “from-use,” or “ab-use.” And it depends on the person, much more than on the article, whether its usefulness or ab-usefulness will be the quality developed in it. Thus, wine, which the Greeks, in their Bacchus, made rightly the type of all passion, and which, when used, “cheereth god and man” (that is to say, strengthens both the divine life, or reasoning power, and the earthy, or carnal power, of man); yet, when abused, becomes “Dionysos,” hurtful especially to the divine part of man, or reason. And again, the body itself, being equally liable to use and to abuse, and, when rightly disciplined, serviceable to the State, both for war and labour, —but when not disciplined, or abused, valueless to the State, and capable only of continuing the private or single existence of the individual (and that but feebly)—the Greeks called such a body an “idiotic” or “private” body, from their word signifying a person employed in no way directly useful to the State; whence finally, our “idiot,” meaning a person entirely occupied with his own concerns.

▲ 5 Hence, it follows that if a thing is to be useful, it must be not only of an availing nature, but in availing hands. Or, in accurate terms, usefulness is value in the hands of the valiant; so that this science of wealth being, as we have just seen, when regarded as the science of Accumulation, accumulative of capacity as well as of material, —when regarded as the Science of Distribution, is distribution not absolute, but discriminate; not of every thing to every man, but of the right thing to the right man. A difficult science, dependent on more than arithmetic.

▲ 6 Wealth, therefore, is “THE POSSESSION OF THE VALUABLE BY THE VALIANT”; and in considering it as a power existing in a nation, the two elements, the value of the thing, and the valour of its possessor, must be estimated together. ▲ 7 Whence it appears that many of the persons commonly considered wealthy, are in reality no more wealthy than the locks of their own strong boxes are, they being inherently and eternally incapable of wealth; and operating for the

nation, in an economical point of view, either as pools of dead water, and eddies in a stream (which, so long as the stream flows, are useless, or serve only to drown people, but may become of importance in a state of stagnation should the stream dry); or else, as dams in a river, of which the ultimate service depends not on the dam, but the miller; or else, as mere accidental stays and impediments, acting not as wealth, but (for we ought to have a correspondent term) as "illth," causing various devastation and trouble around them in all directions; or lastly, act not at all, but are merely animated conditions of delay, (no use being possible of anything they have until they are dead,) in which last condition they are nevertheless often useful as delays, and "impedimenta," if a nation is apt to move too fast. (64)

What is wealth? (Ch4 Sec5)

[text»](#)

▲2

“Having”

With this whimsical, humorous, satiric discussion of the “possession” of valuables by dead people, Ruskin is opening up his very serious and central argument that wealth is not about possession but about the active and productive use of one's wealth.

Ruskin footnote 8—George Herbert on gold

Compare George Herbert, *The Church Porch*, Stanza 28.

Ruskin's quotation from this seventeenth century religious poet is as follows:

Wealth is the conjurer's devil,
Whom when he thinks he hath, the devil hath him.
Gold thou mayst safely touch; but if it stick
Unto thy hands, it woundeth to the quick.

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▲3

Gladiator's death, on a “habet” . . . “quo plurimum posset.”

With these difficult allusions Ruskin emphasizes that wealth, truly understood, is not about possession but rather noble action. The main reference is to Livy's *History of Rome*, Book 7, Chapter 6.

▲7

“wealth” and “illth”

This is Ruskin's striking and well-known distinction between true wealth and “illth.” Illth may look like wealth, but it makes the world worse, not better.

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↑ **Understanding wealth and character** Ch4 Sec 6

[notes»](#)

1. A true science of political economy must not only develop many character to deal with material value but must understand the contradictions between them.
2. We need to understand how wealth affects individuals, what kinds of people become rich, and whether the rich or poor do more for the world.
3. Looking ahead, I can say now that those who become rich are typically, industrious, resolute, proud, covetous, prompt, methodical, sensible, unimaginative, insensitive, and ignorant.
4. The poor include every sort of personality: foolish, wise, reckless, thoughtful, dull, the wicked and criminal, and the merciful, just, and godly.

▲1 This being so, the difficulty of the true science of Political Economy lies not merely in the need of developing manly character to deal with material value, but in the fact, that while the manly character and material value only form wealth by their conjunction, they have nevertheless a mutually destructive operation on each other. For the manly character is apt to ignore, or even cast away, the material value: —whence that of Pope:—

“Sure, of qualities demanding praise,
More go to ruin fortunes, than to raise.”

And on the other hand, the material value is apt to undermine the manly character; ▲2 so that it must be our work, in the issue, to examine what evidence there is of the effect of wealth on the minds of its possessors; also, what kind of person it is who usually sets himself to obtain wealth, and succeeds in doing so; and whether the world owes more gratitude to rich or to poor men, either for their moral influence upon it, or for chief goods, discoveries, and practical advancements. ▲3 I may, however, anticipate future conclusions, so far as to state that in a community regulated only by laws of demand and supply, but protected from open violence, the persons who become rich are, generally speaking, industrious, resolute, proud, covetous, prompt, methodical, sensible, unimaginative, insensitive, and ignorant. ▲4 The persons who remain poor are the entirely foolish, the entirely wise,⁹ the idle, the reckless, the humble, the thoughtful, the dull, the imaginative, the sensitive, the well-informed, the improvident, the irregularly and impulsively wicked, the clumsy knave, the open thief, and the entirely merciful, just, and godly person. (65)

Understanding wealth and character (Ch4 Sec6)

[text»](#)

▲ 1

“More go to ruin fortunes, than to raise.”

Ruskin is quoting from Pope's *Moral Essays*, Epistle, III. Pope's idea is that very generous people often lose their fortunes.

▲ 3–4

“Persons who become rich / Persons who remain poor”

Ruskin is always willing to make sweeping generalizations such as these. His descriptors of those who become rich are a mixture of positive and negative traits but collectively provide a consistent picture of the kind of individual Ruskin has in mind. His descriptors of those who remain poor are much more diverse and contradictory. Ruskin's point is that the best and worse of people remain poor.

▲ 4

Ruskin's footnote 9—the entirely wise

Ruskin quotes line 582 and also lines 558-59 from *Plutus* by the Ancient Greek comedic playwright Aristophanes to make the point that poor people may indeed be wise. The theme of the play is the unfair distribution of wealth.

“Ὁ Ζεὺς δῆπου πένεται.” -- Arist. Plut. 582. It would but weaken the grand words to lean on the preceding ones: —“ ὅτι τοῦ Πλοῦτου παρέχω βελτίονας ἄνδρας, καὶ τὴν γνώμη, καὶ τὴν ἰδέαν.” [Back](#)

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↑ The nature of Price, the value of exchange expressed by currency

Ch4 Sec 7

[notes»](#)

1. Profit comes only from labor—something is made. Exchange may be beneficial and necessary but there is no profit in exchange.
2. If labor is necessary to effect the exchange, this labor can be regarded as profit.
3. Acquisition is predatory. What I get you lose. We say “make a profit,” but no value is added in acquisition. For every plus, there is a minus.
4. Everyone wishes to learn how to get the pluses, and the pluses are celebrated. The minuses retire to the back streets or to the grave, through starvation.

▲ 1 Thus far, then, of wealth. Next, we have to ascertain the nature of PRICE; that is to say, of exchange value, and its expression by currencies. (66)

Note first, of exchange, there can be no profit in it. It is only in labour there can be profit—that is to say, a “making in advance,” or “making in favour of” (from proficio). In exchange, there is only advantage, i.e., a bringing of vantage or power to the exchanging persons. Thus, one man, by sowing and reaping, turns one measure of corn into two measures. That is Profit. Another, by digging and forging, turns one spade into two spades. That is Profit. But the man who has two measures of corn wants sometimes to dig; and the man who has two spades wants sometimes to eat: They exchange

the gained grain for the gained tool; and both are the better for the exchange; but though there is much advantage in the transaction, there is no profit. Nothing is constructed or produced. Only that which had been before constructed is given to the person by whom it can be used. ▲2 If labour is necessary to effect the exchange, that labour is in reality involved in the production, and, like all other labour, bears profit. Whatever number of men are concerned in the manufacture, or in the conveyance, have share in the profit; but neither the manufacture nor the conveyance are the exchange, and in the exchange itself there is no profit.

▲3 There may, however, be acquisition, which is a very different thing. If, in the exchange, one man is able to give what cost him little labour for what has cost the other much, he “acquires” a certain quantity of the produce of the other's labour. And precisely what he acquires, the other loses. In mercantile language, the person who thus acquires is commonly said to have “made a profit”; and I believe that many of our merchants are seriously under the impression that it is possible for everybody, somehow, to make a profit in this manner. Whereas, by the unfortunate constitution of the world we live in, the laws both of matter and motion have quite rigorously forbidden universal acquisition of this kind. Profit, or material gain, is attainable only by construction or by discovery; not by exchange. Whenever material gain follows exchange, for every plus there is a precisely equal minus.

▲4 Unhappily for the progress of the science of Political Economy, the plus quantities, or, —if I may be allowed to coin an awkward plural—the pluses, make a very positive and venerable appearance in the world, so that every one is eager to learn the science which produces results so magnificent; whereas the minuses have, on the other hand, a tendency to retire into back streets, and other places of shade, —or even to get themselves wholly and finally put out of sight in graves: which renders the algebra of this science peculiar, and difficultly legible; a large number of its negative signs being written by the account-keeper in a kind of red ink, which starvation thins, and makes strangely pale, or even quite invisible ink, for the present.

The nature of Price, the value of exchange expressed by currency (Ch4 Sec7)

[text»](#)

Price and Exchange

Sections 7 and 8 comprise a part of “Ad Valorem” that is devoted to Price and Exchange. (Keep in mind that the division into section has been done by the QuikScanner.) One of the essays Ruskin planned for *Cornhill Magazine* was about price and was titled “Thirty Pieces.” Ruskin's economic argument is that there can be no true profit and no creation of value, in exchange, only acquisition and advantage. True profit comes only from labor. This argument is wrong, but Ruskin's underlying motive is to establish that exchange (commerce) must be fair, not exploitive.

Again, while Ruskin's economics theory is wrong, we often recognize the difference between someone who becomes rich creating a genuinely useful product or innovation (e.g., Apple Computer's Steve Jobs) vs. someone whose riches comes from simply manipulating financial markets or by creating and selling products that are more nearly harmful than beneficial.

▲4

“minuses . . . retire into back streets”

Ruskin, at his best, is a powerful writer indeed, and this passage is a savage and biting funny condemnation of predatory commerce and our acceptance of this situation. Notice that the red ink of debt implies blood and that the illegible ledgers of Political Economy signify starvation and death. A similar idea is expressed in Essay 2 (“The Veins of Wealth”), Section 1, #2. The losers of our economic system are hidden from view in the “dark streets.”

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↑ **Just and unjust exchange** Ch4 Sec 8

[notes»](#)

1. The Science of Exchange is exploitive. Advantage arises from the ignorance or incapacity of the other person.
2. All other sciences seek enlightenment. Only this science requires and looks for ignorance.
3. A just exchange requires advantage on all sides—producer, consumer, and intermediary (the merchant). The merchant's legitimate share by his time and labor must be understood by all.
4. Advantage means both getting what we need and what we wish for. And much of what we seek comes from our wishes rather than our needs.
5. Pricing rests on how (1) how strongly the purchaser wants something vs. how strongly the owner wants to keep it and (2) how much the purchaser can pay vs. the owner's need for that labor.
6. The complexities of pricing are finally calculated on the basis of labor, so it is necessary to define labor.

▲1 The Science of Exchange, or, as I hear it has been proposed to call it, of “Catallactics,” considered as one of gain, is, therefore, simply nugatory; but considered as one of acquisition, it is a very curious science, differing in its data and basis from every other science known. Thus: —if I can exchange a needle with a savage for a diamond, my power of doing so depends either on the savage's ignorance of social arrangements in Europe, or on his want of power to take advantage of

them, by selling the diamond to any one else for more needles. If, farther, I make the bargain as completely advantageous to myself as possible, by giving to the savage a needle with no eye in it (reaching, thus a sufficiently satisfactory type of the perfect operation of catallactic science), the advantage to me in the entire transaction depends wholly upon the ignorance, powerlessness, or heedlessness of the person dealt with. Do away with these, and catallactic advantage becomes impossible. So far, therefore, as the science of exchange relates to the advantage of one of the exchanging persons only, it is founded on the ignorance or incapacity of the opposite person. Where these vanish, it also vanishes. It is therefore a science founded on nescience, and an art founded on artlessness. ▲2 But all other sciences and arts, except this, have for their object the doing away with their opposite nescience and artlessness. This science, alone of sciences, must, by all available means, promulgate and prolong its opposite nescience; otherwise the science itself is impossible. It is, therefore, peculiarly and alone the science of darkness; probably a bastard science —not by any means a divina scientia, but one begotten of another father, that father who, advising his children to turn stones into bread, is himself employed in turning bread into stones, and who, if you ask a fish of him (fish not being producible on his estate), can but give you a serpent. (67)

▲3 The general law, then, respecting just or economical exchange, is simply this: —There must be advantage on both sides (or if only advantage on one, at least no disadvantage on the other) to the persons exchanging; and just payment for his time, intelligence, and labour, to any intermediate person effecting the transaction (commonly called a merchant); and whatever advantage there is on either side, and whatever pay is given to the intermediate person, should be thoroughly known to all concerned. All attempt at concealment implies some practice of the opposite, or undivine science, founded on nescience. Whence another saying of the Jew merchant's— “As a nail between the stone joints, so doth sin stick fast between buying and selling.” Which peculiar riveting of stone and timber, in men's dealings with each other, is again set forth in the house which was to be destroyed—timber and stones together—when Zechariah's roll (more probably “curved sword”) flew over it: “the curse that goeth forth over all the earth upon every one that stealeth and holdeth himself guiltless,” instantly followed by the vision of the Great Measure; —the measure “of the injustice of them in all the earth” (αὕτη ἡ ἀδικία αὐτῶν ἐν πάσῃ τῆ γῆ), with the weight of lead for its lid, and the woman, the spirit of wickedness, within it; —that is to say, Wickedness hidden by Dulness, and formalized, outwardly, into ponderously established cruelty. “ It shall be set upon its own base in the land of Babel.”¹⁰ (68)

▲4 I have hitherto carefully restricted myself, in speaking of exchange, to the use of the term “advantage”; but that term includes two ideas; the advantage, namely, of getting what we need, and that of getting what we wish for. 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. ▲5 Hence, the right discussion of the nature of price is a very high metaphysical and psychical problem; sometimes to be solved only in a passionate manner, as by David in his counting the price of the water of the well by the gate of Bethlehem; but its first conditions are the following: — The price of anything is the quantity of labour given by the person desiring it, in order to obtain possession of it. This price depends on four variable quantities. A. The quantity of wish the purchaser has for the thing; opposed to a, the quantity of wish the seller has to keep it. B. The quantity of labour the purchaser can afford, to obtain the thing opposed to β, the quantity of labour the seller can afford, to keep it. These quantities are operative only in excess; i.e. the quantity of wish (A) means the quantity of wish for this thing, above wish for other things; and the quantity of work (B) means the quantity which can be spared to get this thing from the quantity needed to get other things. (69)

▲6 Phenomena of price, therefore, are intensely complex, curious, and interesting—too complex, however, to be examined yet; every one of them, when traced far enough, showing itself at last as a

part of the bargain of the Poor of the Flock (or “flock of slaughter”), “If ye think good, give ME my price, and if not, forbear” Zech. xi. 12; but as the price of everything is to be calculated finally in labour, it is necessary to define the nature of that standard.

Just and unjust exchange (Ch4 Sec8)

[text»](#)

▲ 1–3

The Science of Exchange

Ruskin's idea is that exchange as it is generally conceived is predatory and unjust. A transaction will be unjust either because one party has no choice (incapacity) or lacks information about the market value of what he is buying or selling—as in the case of the savage who sells a diamond for a needle and, indeed, a defective needle. Ruskin's further point is that the science of exchange differs from all other sciences in that it built upon ignorance and requires ignorance.

▲ 3

“As a nail between stone joints”

This is another (supposed) quotation from the Old Testament's King Solomon, with whom Ruskin opens his third essay. The remainder of the paragraph (including footnote 10) consists of concatenated Biblical references

“As a nail between stone joints so doth sin stick fast between buying and selling.” Ecclesiasticus 27: 2 (Apocrypha).

Ruskin footnote 10—Zechariah. 5. 11.

He replied, “To the country of Babylonia to build a house for it. When the house is ready, the basket will be set there in its place.” [Back](#)

▲ 5

“David in his counting the price of the water” (2 Samuel 23:15-16)

This is a complex Biblical allusion.

“Price . . . is the quantity of labor”

Ruskin in pointing out that in a negotiation between buyer and seller the buyer has a certain desire for the item and a certain means (currency) to purchase it, while the seller has a certain desire to keep the item but a certain need for currency. For Ruskin these desires and needs are all measured as a quantity of labor, as Ruskin set forth in Essay III, Sec 3 #2.

▲ 6

“bargain of the Poor of the Flock”

Ruskin combines verses 4, 5, 11, and 12 from Zechariah 11. The general idea is to provide a religious perspective on the injustice of pricing and commerce.

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[↑ Labor](#) Ch4 Sec 9

[notes»](#)

1. Labor is the life of a man striving against various kinds of difficulty. "Life" includes the man's intellect, soul, and physical power. Good labor calls for enough intellect and feeling harmoniously regulate physical force.
2. The quality and kind of labor has an invariable value. Only the quantity varies, and the price of something must be calculated as the quantity of labor it required.
3. As the apple-planting example shows, if two objects with equal exchange value required different amounts of labor, the one requiring more labor may or may not sell for more. But the extra labor it required does not make that labor "cheaper."

▲ 1 Labour is the contest of the life of man with an opposite; —the term "life" including his intellect, soul, and physical power, contending with question, difficulty, trial, or material force. (70)

Labour is of a higher or lower order, as it includes more or fewer of the elements of life: and labour of good quality, in any kind, includes always as much intellect and feeling as will fully and harmoniously regulate the physical force.

In speaking of the value and price of labour, it is necessary always to understand labour of a given rank and quality, as we should speak of gold or silver of a given standard. Bad (that is, heartless, inexperienced, or senseless) labour cannot be valued; it is like gold of uncertain alloy, or flawed iron.¹¹

▲ 2 The quality and kind of labour being given, its value, like that of all other valuable things, is invariable. But the quantity of it which must be given for other things is variable: and in estimating this variation, the price of other things must always be counted by the quantity of labour; not the price of labour by the quantity of other things.

▲ 3 Thus, if we want to plant an apple sapling in rocky ground, it may take two hours' work; in soft ground, perhaps only half an hour. Grant the soil equally good for the tree in each case. Then the value of the sapling planted by two hours' work is nowise greater than that of the sapling planted in half an hour. One will bear no more fruit than the other. Also, one half-hour of work is as valuable as another half-hour; nevertheless the one sapling has cost four such pieces of work, the other only one. Now the proper statement of this fact is, not that the labour on the hard ground is cheaper than on the soft; but that the tree is dearer. The exchange value may, or may not, afterwards depend on this fact. If other people have plenty of soft ground to plant in, they will take no cognizance of our two hours' labour, in the price they will offer for the plant on the rock. And if, through want of sufficient botanical science, we have planted an upas tree instead of an apple, the exchange-value will be a negative quantity; still less proportionate to the labour expended. (71).

What is commonly called cheapness of labour, signifies, therefore, in reality, that many obstacles have to be overcome by it; so that much labour is required to produce a small result. But this should never be spoken of as cheapness of labour, but as dearness of the object wrought for. It would be just as rational to say that walking was cheap, because we had ten miles to walk home to our dinner, as that labour was cheap, because we had to work ten hours to earn it.

Labor (Ch4 Sec9)

[text»](#)

▲1

Ruskin footnote 11—origins of the term “Labour”

Labour which is entirely good of its kind, that is to say, effective, or efficient, the Greeks called "weighable," or ἄξιος, translated usually "worthy," and because thus substantial and true, they called its price τιμή, the "honourable estimate" of it (honorarium): this word being founded on their conception of true labour as a divine thing, to be honoured with the kind of honour given to the gods; whereas the price of false labour, or of that which led away from life, was to be, not honour, but vengeance; for which they reserved another word, attributing the exaction of such price to a peculiar goddess, called Tisiphone, the "requirer (or quittance-taker) of death"; a person versed in the highest branches of arithmetic, and punctual in her habits; with whom accounts current have been opened also in modern days. [Back](#)

▲ 1-2

“labour is invariable”

Labor of good quality is in itself absolutely good. But Ruskin will later say that such labor can still be put to constructive or destructive uses.

▲3

“upas tree”

These trees are poisonous.

“cheapness of labour”

When a great deal of labor is needed to achieve a certain result, finding cheap labor is the only way to make the work profitable. Thus, Ruskin says, the term “cheap labor” is used for results that require a great deal of labor.

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↑ **Production, as the culmination of labor** Ch4 Sec 10

[notes»](#)

1. Production is now defined (in the context of labor). Almost all labor is either positive—it produces life—or negative—it produces death.
2. A nation’s wealth depends on the quantity of labor it spends obtaining and employing the means of life. “Employing” means distributing and consuming.
3. Consumption, if it is wise consumption, is the true end of production (despite what economists say), and wise consumption is actually much more difficult than just wise production.
4. Twenty people can gain money for one who can use it. The vital question for an individual and a nation, is, never “how much do they make?” but “to what purpose do they spend?”

▲1 The last word which we have to define is “Production.”

I have hitherto spoken of all labour as profitable; because it is impossible to consider under one head the quality or value of labour, and its aim. But labour of the best quality may be various in aim. It may be either constructive (“gathering” from con and struo), as agriculture; nugatory, as jewel-cutting; or destructive (“scattering,” from de and struo), as war. It is not, however, always easy to prove labour, apparently nugatory, to be actually so;¹² generally, the formula holds good: “he that gathereth not, scattereth”; thus, the jeweller's art is probably very harmful in its ministering to a clumsy and inelegant pride. So that, finally, I believe nearly all labour may be shortly divided into positive and negative labour: positive, that which produces life; negative, that which produces death; the most directly negative labour being murder, and the most directly positive, the bearing and rearing of children; so that in the precise degree in which murder is hateful, on the negative side of idleness, in the exact degree child-rearing is admirable, on the positive side of idleness. For which reason, and because of the honour that there is in rearing¹³ children, while the wife is said to be as the vine (for cheering), the children are as the olive branch, for praise: nor for praise only, but for peace (because large families can only be reared in times of peace): though since, in their spreading and voyaging in various directions, they distribute strength, they are, to the home strength, as arrives in the hand of the giant—striking here, and there far away. (72)

▲ 2 Labour being thus various in its result, the prosperity of any nation is in exact proportion to the quantity of labour which it spends in obtaining and employing means of life. ▲ 3 Observe, —I say, obtaining and employing; that is to say, not merely wisely producing, but wisely distributing and consuming. Economists usually speak as if there were no good in consumption absolute.¹⁴ So far from this being so, consumption absolute is the end, crown, and perfection of production; and wise consumption is a far more difficult art than wise production. ▲ 4 Twenty people can gain money for one who can use it; and the vital question, for individual and for nation, is, never “how much do they make?” but “to what purpose do they spend?”

Production, as the culmination of labor (Ch4 Sec10)

[text»](#)

▲ 1

“The last word which we have to define is ‘Production.’”

Although Ruskin announces he is now going to discuss production, his ideas on production emerge following his continued discussion of labor. Recall also that Ruskin opened this essay by challenging Mill's definition of “Produce” (production).

“labor may be . . . either constructive . . . or destructive”

Labor can be destructive in the conditions of the labor that produces something It can be destructive in distribution and consumption.

Ruskin footnote 12—nugatory (neither good nor bad) labor

Many of Ruskin's footnotes are lengthy digressions, but they frequently include interesting commentary, such as the anecdote Ruskin offers here about lack of cooperation.

The most accurately nugatory labour is, perhaps, that of which not enough is given to answer a purpose effectually, and which, therefore, has all to be done over again. Also, labour which fails of effect through non-co-operation. The curé of a little village near Bellinzona, to whom I had expressed wonder that the peasants allowed the Ticino to flood their fields, told me that they would not join to build an effectual embankment high up the valley, because everybody said “that would help his neighbours as much as himself.” So every proprietor built a bit of low embankment about his own field; and the Ticino, as soon as it had a mind, swept away and swallowed all up together. [Back](#)

▲ 1

Ruskin footnote 13—Ruskin praises child-rearing

Observe, I say, rearing," not "begetting." The praise is in the seventh season, not in σπορητός, nor in φυταλία, but in ὄψωρα. It is strange that men always praise enthusiastically any person who, by a momentary exertion, saves a life; but praise very hesitatingly a person who, by exertion and self-denial prolonged through years, creates one. We give the crown "ob civem servatum"; -- why not "ob civem natum?" Born, I mean, to the full, in soul as well as body. England has oak enough, I think, for both chaplets. [Back](#)

▲ 3

Ruskin footnote 14—Mill on productive consumption

When Mr. Mill speaks of productive consumption, he only means consumption which results in increase of capital, or material wealth. See I. iii. 4, and I. iii. 5. [Back](#)

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[↑](#) **Capital** Ch4 Sec 11

[notes»](#)

1. Capital and its functions are now defined. Capital is the root from which appears either flowers and bread or just more bulbs and seeds.
2. The political economy of Europe's focuses on production and accumulation. It's always about more bulbs; it never sees a tulip.
3. True production leads directly, or indirectly, to consumption. The greedy value production as accumulation: wheat in the granary but not eaten.
4. The true goal of political economy is to good consumption on a large scale.
5. Mill's errs in stating that a demand for commodities (in contrast to direct service) is not labor. From an economic standpoint, the various forms of consumption are the same to the worker.
6. But the worker does have an interest in what is produced and how it is used, and the manner of consumption—how much life is produced— is the real test of production.
7. My key point is this: THERE IS NO WEALTH BUT LIFE. That country is richest that produces the greatest number of noble, happy people.

▲1 The reader may, perhaps, have been surprised at the slight reference I have hitherto made to “capital,” and its functions. It is here the place to define them. Capital signifies “head, or source, or root material” —it is material by which some derivative or secondary good is produced. It is only capital proper (*caput vivum*, not *caput mortuum*) when it is thus producing something different from itself. It is a root, which does not enter into vital function till it produces something else than a root: namely, fruit. That fruit will in time again produce roots; and so all living capital issues in reproduction of capital; but capital which produces nothing but capital is only root producing root; bulb issuing in bulb, never in tulip; seed issuing in seed, never in bread. ▲2 The Political Economy of Europe has hitherto devoted itself wholly to the multiplication, or (less even) the aggregation, of bulbs. It never saw, nor conceived, such a thing as a tulip. Nay, boiled bulbs they might have been—glass bulbs—Prince Rupert's drops, consummated in powder (well, if it were glass-powder and not gunpowder), for any end or meaning the economists had in defining the laws of aggregation. We will try and get a clearer notion of them (73).

The best and simplest general type of capital is a well-made ploughshare. Now, if that ploughshare did nothing but beget other ploughshares, in a polypous manner, —however the great cluster of polypous plough might glitter in the sun, it would have lost its function of capital. It becomes true capital only by another kind of splendour, —when it is seen “splendescere sulco,” to grow bright in the furrow; rather with diminution of its substance, than addition, by the noble friction. And the true home question, to every capitalist and to every nation, is not, “how many ploughs have you?” but, “where are your furrows?” not— “how quickly will this capital reproduce itself?” —but, “what will it do during reproduction?” What substance will it furnish, good for life? what work construct, protective of life? if none, its own reproduction is useless—if worse than none, (for capital may destroy life as well as support it), its own reproduction is worse than useless; it is merely an advance from Tisiphone, on mortgage—not a profit by any means.

Not a profit, as the ancients truly saw, and showed in the type of Ixion; —for capital is the head, or fountain head of wealth—the “well-head” of wealth, as the clouds are the well-heads of rain; but when clouds are without water, and only beget clouds, they issue in wrath at last, instead of rain, and in lightning instead of harvest; whence Ixion is said first to have invited his guests to a banquet, and then made them fall into a pit, (as also Demas' silver mine,) after which, to show the rage of riches passing from lust of pleasure to lust of power, yet power not truly understood, Ixion is said to have desired Juno, and instead, embracing a cloud (or phantasm), to have begotten the Centaurs; the power of mere wealth being, in itself, as the embrace of a shadow, —comfortless, (so also “Ephraim feedeth on wind and followeth after the east wind;” or “that which is not”—Prov. xxiii. 5; and again Dante's Geryon, the type of avaricious fraud, as he flies, gathers the air up with retractile

claws, —“l'aer a se raccolse”¹⁵) but in its offspring, a mingling of the brutal with the human nature; human in sagacity—using both intellect and arrow; but brutal in its body and hoof, for consuming, and trampling down. For which sin Ixion is at last bound upon a wheel—fiery and toothed, and rolling perpetually in the air: —the type of human labour when selfish and fruitless (kept far into the Middle Ages in their wheels of fortune); the wheel which has in it no breath or spirit, but is whirled by chance only; whereas of all true work the Ezekiel vision is true, that the Spirit of the living creature is in the wheels, and where the angels go, the wheels go by them; but move no otherwise. (74)

▲3 This being the real nature of capital, it follows that there are two kinds of true production, always going on in an active State: one of seed, and one of food; or production for the Ground, and for the Mouth; both of which are by covetous persons thought to be production only for the granary; whereas the function of the granary is but intermediate and conservative, fulfilled in distribution; else it ends in nothing but mildew, and nourishment of rats and worms. And since production for the Ground is only useful with future hope of harvest, all *essential* production is for the Mouth; and is finally measured by the mouth; hence, as I said above, consumption is the crown of production; and the wealth of a nation is only to be estimated by what it consumes. (75)

The want of any clear sight of this fact is the capital error, issuing in rich interest and revenue of error among the political economists. Their minds are continually set on money-gain, not on mouth-gain; and they fall into every sort of net and snare, dazzled by the coin-glitter as birds by the fowler's glass; or rather (for there is not much else like birds in them) they are like children trying to jump on the heads of their own shadows; the money-gain being only the shadow of the true gain, which is humanity.

▲4 The final object of political economy, therefore, is to get good method of consumption, and great quantity of consumption: in other words, to use everything, and to use it nobly. whether it be substance, service, or service perfecting substance. ▲5 The most curious error in Mr. Mill's entire work, (provided for him originally by Ricardo,) is his endeavour to distinguish between direct and indirect service, and consequent assertion that a demand for commodities is not demand for labour (I. v. 9, et seq.). He distinguishes between labourers employed to lay out pleasure grounds, and to manufacture velvet; declaring that it makes material difference to the labouring classes in which of these two ways a capitalist spends his money; because the employment of the gardeners is a demand for labour, but the purchase of velvet is not.¹⁶ Error colossal, as well as strange. It will, indeed, make a difference to the labourer whether we bid him swing his scythe in the spring winds, or drive the loom in pestilential air. but, so far as his pocket is concerned, it makes, to him absolutely no difference whether we order him to make green velvet, with seed and a scythe, or red velvet, with silk and scissors. Neither does it anywise concern him whether, when the velvet is made, we consume it by walking on it, or wearing it, so long as our consumption of it is wholly selfish. (76)

▲6 But if our consumption is to be in anywise unselfish, not only our mode of consuming the articles we require interests him, but also the kind of article we require with a view to consumption. As thus (returning for a moment to Mr. Mill's great hardware theory¹⁷): it matters, so far as the labourer's immediate profit is concerned, not an iron filing whether I employ him in growing a peach, or forging a bombshell; but my probable mode of consumption of those articles matters seriously. Admit that it is to be in both cases “unselfish,” and the difference, to him, is final, whether when his child is ill, I walk into his cottage and give it the peach, or drop the shell down his chimney, and blow his roof off.

The worst of it, for the peasant, is, that the capitalist's consumption of the peach is apt to be selfish, and of the shell, distributive;¹⁸ but, in all cases, this is the broad and general fact, that on due

catallactic commercial principles, somebody's roof must go off in fulfilment of the bomb's destiny. You may grow for your neighbour, at your liking, grapes or grape-shot; he will also, catallactically, grow grapes or grape-shot for you, and you will each reap what you have sown.

It is, therefore, the manner and issue of consumption which are the real tests of production. Production does not consist in things laboriously made, but in things serviceably consumable; and the question for the nation is not how much labour it employs, but how much life it produces. For as consumption is the end and aim of production, so life is the end and aim of consumption. (77)

I left this question to the reader's thought two months ago, choosing rather that he should work it out for himself than have it sharply stated to him. But now, the ground being sufficiently broken (and the details into which the several questions, here opened, must lead us, being too complex for discussion in the pages of a periodical, so that I must pursue them elsewhere), ▲7 I desire, in closing the series of introductory papers, to leave this one great fact clearly stated. THERE IS NO WEALTH BUT LIFE. Life, including all its powers of love, of joy, and of admiration. That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings; that man is richest who, having perfected the functions of his own life to the utmost, has also the widest helpful influence, both personal, and by means of his possessions, over the lives of others.

A strange political economy; the only one, nevertheless, that ever was or can be: all political economy founded on self-interest¹⁹ being but the fulfilment of that which once brought schism into the Policy of angels, and ruin into the Economy of Heaven.

Capital (Ch4 Sec11)

text»

Sec 11

Overview of Section 11

Capital is not one of the economic terms that Ruskin, at the beginning of this essay, said he was going to define. The structure of *Unto This Last* is not straightforward.

Ruskin explains that capital is good only when it furthers consumption and the right kind of consumption. Political economy must teach truly useful consumption. This is paternalistic in the sense that Ruskin assumes what people should want to buy. This part of “Ad Valorem” is an early statement about the need for consumption rather than excessive savings. As explained by Fain (Chapter IV), there is a line of influence from Ruskin to the radical economist John A. Hobson to John Maynard Keynes.

▲2

“It never saw, nor conceived, such a thing as a tulip”

This is satiric commentary on the narrow and life-denying focus of political economy.

“glass bulbs . . . Prince Rupert's drops . . . gunpowder”

In a series of allusions, Ruskin moves quickly from tulip bulbs to Prince Rupert's drops, which were special glass bulbs that, as a form of amusement, would make tiny explosions and then disintegrate into glass power, and finally to war fought with gunpowder.

“it is merely an advance from Tisiphone, on mortgage—not a profit by any means”

Tisiphone is one of the Furies in Greek mythology. Her specialty is revenge. Ruskin satirically depicts Tisiphone as a businesswoman loaning money to businessmen—but destined to demand a terrible repayment.

“Ixion . . . Demas . . . Geryon”

A series of references that show the barrenness and evil of capital (the money held by investors) put to bad use. Ixion is an especially evil mythological figure. Demas represents destructive greed in John Bunyan's allegorical narrative *The Pilgrim's Progress*. In Dante's *Inferno*, Geryon is the Monster of Fraud.

Ruskin footnote 15—“l'aer a se raccolse”

So also in the vision of the women bearing the ephah, before quoted, “the wind was in their wings,” not wings “of a stork,” as in our version; but “*milvi*,” of a kite, in the Vulgate, or perhaps more accurately still in the Septuagint, “hoopoe,” a bird connected typically with the power of riches by many traditions, of which that of its petition for a crest of gold is perhaps the most interesting. The “Birds” of Aristophanes, in which its part is principal, are full of them; note especially the “fortification of the air with baked bricks, like Babylon,” l. 550; and, again, compare the Plutus of Dante, who (to show the influence of riches in destroying the reason) is the only one of the powers of the Inferno who cannot speak intelligibly and also the cowardliest; he is not merely quelled or restrained, but literally “collapses” at a word; the sudden and helpless operation of mercantile panic being all told in the brief metaphor, “as the sails, swollen with the wind, fall, when the mast breaks.” [Back](#)

▲4–6

Ruskin's argument with Mill

Ruskin's quarrel with Mill is for specialists and is explained in [Yarker](#) and [Wilmer](#). Ruskin makes his core position very clear at the beginning and end of his detailed argument: What matters is consumption. What matters is that the nation produce ample amounts of the kinds of goods that people really need and that will help them live good lives.

▲5

Ruskin footnote 16—Raw material

The value of raw material, which has, indeed, to be deducted from the price of the labour, is not contemplated in the passages referred to, Mr. Mill having fallen into the mistake solely by pursuing the collateral results of the payment of wages to middlemen. He says "The consumer does not, with his own funds, pay the weaver for his day's work. "Pardon me; the consumer of the velvet pays the weaver with his own funds as much as he pays the gardener. He pays, probably, an intermediate ship-owner, velvet merchant, and shopman; pays carriage money, shop rent, damage money, time money, and care money; all these are above and beside the velvet price, (just as the wages of a head gardener would be above the grass price). but the velvet is as much produced by the consumer's capital, though he does not pay for it till six months after production, as the grass is produced by his capital, though he does not pay the man who mowed and rolled it on Monday, till Saturday afternoon. I do not know if Mr. Mill's conclusion,—"the capital cannot be dispensed with, the purchasers can " (p. 98), has yet been reduced to practice in the City on any large scale. [Back](#)

▲6

Ruskin footnote 17—Mill's hardware theory

Which, observe, is the precise opposite of the one under examination. The hardware theory required us to discharge our gardeners and engage manufacturers; the velvet theory requires us to discharge our manufacturers and engage gardeners. [Back](#)

Ruskin footnote 18—Unjust wars

It is one very awful form of the operation of wealth in Europe that it is entirely capitalists' wealth which supports unjust wars. Just wars do not need so much money to support them; for most of the men who wage such, wage them gratis; but for an unjust war, men's bodies and souls have both to be bought; and the best tools of war for them besides; which makes such war costly to the maximum; not to speak of the cost of base fear, and angry suspicion, between nations which have not grace nor honesty enough in all their multitudes to buy an hour's peace of mind with: as, at present, France and England, purchasing of each other ten millions sterling worth of consternation annually, (a remarkably light crop, half thorns and half aspen leaves, —sown, reaped, and granaried by the “science” of the modern political economist, teaching covetousness instead of truth.) And all unjust war being supportable, if not by pillage of the enemy, only by loans from capitalists, these loans are repaid by subsequent taxation of the people, who appear to have no will in the matter, the capitalists' will being the primary root of the war; but its real root is the covetousness of the whole nation, rendering it incapable of faith, frankness, or justice, and bringing about, therefore, in due time, his own separate loss and punishment to each person. [Back](#)

▲7

“THERE IS NO WEALTH BUT LIFE”

This is the most important and most famous sentence in *Unto This Last* and Ruskin's best-known statement of social criticism. Ruskin goes on state what is true success for a nation and what is a truly successful human life.

Ruskin practiced what he preached. He spent the large fortune he inherited and the considerable income he derived from his writing and speaking on all kinds of philanthropic projects.

Ruskin footnote 19—Self-interest

“In all reasoning about prices, the proviso must be understood, ‘supposing all parties to take care of their own interest.’” —Mill, III. i. 5. [Back](#)

TOC

↑ The consideration of population growth Ch4

Sec 12

notes»

1. Because we are human, we can bravely and lovingly manage population growth.
2. Political economists often oppose raising wages for fear that an increased population (or drunkenness) will negate the benefit.
3. Why so? Few will say the poor are a different species of humankind, and so why can't the poor advance if given the same benefits that you received?
4. Some argue that the poor cannot benefit from education, but refusing education is actually crueler than refusing food.
5. Even the most wretched of the poor are purer and more holy than those who have left them like this.

▲1 “The greatest number of human beings noble and happy.” But is the nobleness consistent with the number? Yes, not only consistent with it, but essential to it. The maximum of life can only be

reached by the maximum of virtue. In this respect the law of human population differs wholly from that of animal life. The multiplication of animals is checked only by want of food, and by the hostility of races; the population of the gnat is restrained by the hunger of the swallow, and that of the swallow by the scarcity of gnats. Man, considered as an animal, is indeed limited by the same laws: hunger, or plague, or war, are the necessary and only restraints upon his increase, —effectual restraints hitherto, —his principal study having been how most swiftly to destroy himself, or ravage his dwelling-places, and his highest skill directed to give range to the famine, seed to the plague, and sway to the sword. But, considered as other than an animal, his increase is not limited by these laws. It is limited only by the limits of his courage and his love. Both of these have their bounds; and ought to have; his race has its bounds also; but these have not yet been reached, nor will be reached for ages. (78)

▲2 In all the ranges of human thought I know none so melancholy as the speculations of political economists on the population question. It is proposed to better the condition of the labourer by giving him higher wages. “Nay,” says the economist, —“if you raise his wages, he will either people down to the same point of misery at which you found him, or drink your wages away.” He will. I know it. Who gave him this will? Suppose it were your own son of whom you spoke, declaring to me that you dared not take him into your firm, nor even give him his just labourer’s wages, because if you did he would die of drunkenness, and leave half a score of children to the parish. “Who gave your son these dispositions?” —I should enquire. Has he them by inheritance or by education? By one or other they must come; and as in him, so also in the poor. ▲3 Either these poor are of a race essentially different from ours, and unredeemable (which, however, often implied, I have heard none yet openly say), or else by such care as we have ourselves received, we may make them continent and sober as ourselves-wise and dispassionate as we are models arduous of imitation. ▲4 “But,” it is answered, “they cannot receive education.” Why not? That is precisely the point at issue. Charitable persons suppose the worst fault of the rich is to refuse the people meat; and the people cry for their meat, kept back by fraud, to the Lord of Multitudes.²⁰ Alas! it is not meat of which the refusal is cruelest, or to which the claim is validest. The life is more than the meat. The rich not only refuse food to the poor; they refuse wisdom; they refuse virtue; they refuse salvation. Ye sheep without shepherd, it is not the pasture that has been shut from you, but the Presence. Meat! perhaps your right to that may be pleadable; but other rights have to be pleaded first. Claim your crumbs from the table, if you will; but claim them as children, not as dogs; claim your right to be fed, but claim more loudly your right to be holy, perfect, and pure. (79)

▲5 Strange words to be used of working people: “What! holy; without any long robes nor anointing oils; these rough-jacketed, rough-worded persons; set to nameless and dishonoured service? Perfect! —these, with dim eyes and cramped limbs, and slowly wakening minds? Pure—these, with sensual desire and grovelling thought; foul of body, and coarse of soul?” It may be so; nevertheless, such as they are, they are the holiest, perfectest, purest persons the earth can at present show. They may be what you have said; but if so, they yet are holier than we, who have left them thus.

The consideration of population growth (Ch4 Sec12)

[text»](#)

▲2

“people down to the same point of misery”

People down means to have more children and increase the population.

“speculations of political economists on the population question”

Robert Malthus (1766-1834) in *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, introduced the ideas that overpopulation must always cause eventual economic hardship and that greater numbers of children will prevent the poor from improving their condition.

▲4

Ruskin footnote 20—Ruskin on socialism

James v. 4. Observe, in these statements I am not talking up, nor countenancing one whit, the common socialist idea of division of property; division of property is its destruction; and with it the destruction of all hope, all industry, and all justice: it is simply chaos a chaos towards which the believers in modern political economy are fast tending, and from which I am striving to save them. The rich man does not keep back meat from the poor by retaining his riches; but by basely using them. Riches are a form of strength; and a strong man does not injure others by keeping his strength, but by using it injuriously. The socialist, seeing a strong man oppress a weak one, cries out.— “Break the strong man's arms.” but I say, “Teach him to use them to better purpose.” The fortitude and intelligence which acquire riches are intended, by the Giver of both, not to scatter, nor to give away, but to employ those riches in the service of mankind; in other words, in the redemption of the erring and aid of the weak—that is to say, there is first to be the work to gain money; then the Sabbath of use for it—the Sabbath, whose law is, not to lose life, but to save. It is continually the fault or the folly of the poor that they are poor, as it is usually a child's fault if it falls into a pond, and a cripple's weakness that slips at a crossing; nevertheless, most passers—by would pull the child out, or help up the cripple. Put it at the worst, that all the poor of the world are but disobedient children, or careless cripples, and that all rich people are wise and strong, and you will see at once that neither is the socialist right in desiring to make everybody poor, powerless, and foolish as he is himself, nor the rich man right in leaving the children in the mire. [Back](#)

▲4-5

Ruskin's dramatic shifts in stance and style

Notice how Ruskin can shift from arguing economic theory in an analytical manner to speaking as an angry Biblical prophet. Ruskin's other voices include both the bitter satirist and the sly, even playful satirist. Also, passionate vision of people living well—on which he closes.

[TOC](#)

↑ **Economists propose false remedies for over-population** Ch4 Sec 13

notes»

1. Economists propose (1) colonization, (2) land restoration, and (3) discouraging marriage. But the real solution is good use of our existing land.
2. To Ricardo the issue is simply how many people can survive on the land (“the natural law of wages.”) A working girl responds: What about their quality of life?
3. Ricardo doesn’t recognize that a well-managed community can support many more people and might free some for intellectual inquiry. How does “the natural law of wages” account for this?
4. A badly managed community will require many police and those who bring people back to God.

▲1 But what can be done for them? Who can clothe—who teach—who restrain their multitudes? What end can there be for them at last, but to consume one another?

I hope for another end, though not, indeed, from any of the three remedies for over-population commonly suggested by economists.

These three are, in brief—Colonization; Bringing in of waste lands; or Discouragement of Marriage. (80)

The first and second of these expedients merely evade or delay the question. It will, indeed, be long before the world has been all colonized, and its deserts all brought under cultivation. But the radical question is not how much habitable land is in the world, but how many human beings ought to be maintained on a given space of habitable land.

▲2 Observe, I say, *ought* to be, not how many can be. Ricardo, with his usual inaccuracy, defines what he calls the “natural rate of wages” as “that which will maintain the labourer.” Maintain him! yes; but how? —the question was instantly thus asked of me by a working girl, to whom I read the passage. I will amplify her question for her. “Maintain him, how?” As, first, to what length of life? Out of a given number of fed persons how many are to be old—how many young; that is to say, will you arrange their maintenance so as to kill them early—say at thirty or thirty-five on the average, including deaths of weakly or ill-fed children? —or so as to enable them to live out a natural life? You will feed a greater number, in the first case,²¹ by rapidity of succession; probably a happier number in the second: which does Mr. Ricardo mean to be their natural state, and to which state belongs the natural rate of wages?

▲3 Again: A piece of land which will only support ten idle, ignorant, and improvident persons, will support thirty or forty intelligent and industrious ones. Which of these is their natural state, and to which of them belongs the natural rate of wages?

Again: If a piece of land support forty persons in industrious ignorance; and if, tired of this ignorance, they set apart ten of their number to study the properties of cones, and the sizes of stars; the labour of these ten, being withdrawn from the ground, must either tend to the increase of food in some transitional manner, or the persons set apart for sidereal and conic purposes must starve, or some one else starve instead of them. What is, therefore, the natural rate of wages of the scientific persons, and how does this rate relate to, or measure, their reverted or transitional productiveness?

▲4 Again: If the ground maintains, at first, forty labourers in a peaceable and pious state of mind, but they become in a few years so quarrelsome and impious that they have to set apart five, to meditate upon and settle their disputes; —ten, armed to the teeth with costly instruments, to enforce the decisions; and five to remind everybody in an eloquent manner of the existence of a God; what will be the result upon the general power of production, and what is the “natural rate of wages” of the meditative, muscular, and oracular labourers?

Economists propose false remedies for over-population (Ch4 Sec13)

[text»](#)

▲ #2

Ricardo's "natural rate of wages"

Ricardo writes: "Labour, like all other things which are purchased and sold, and which may be increased or diminished in quantity, has its natural and its market price. The natural price of labour is that price which is necessary to enable the labourers, one with another, to subsist and to perpetuate their race, without either increase or diminution."

Ruskin is unfair to Ricardo. Ricardo is being conceptual and analytical and is not endorsing subsistence wages, and he allows that actual wages may at times be higher than the natural level and that the minimal acceptable living standard varies over time and from nation to nation. He certainly does not endorse that we "arrange their maintenance so as to kill them early." But there is a callousness in Ricardo's phrasing that invites, I think, both callous attitudes toward workers on the part employers and, consequently, satiric attack by Ruskin. Ruskin's satire recalls Swift's *Modest Proposal*.

Now natural rate of wages is changed by the possibility of transfer payments. If an employer pays minimum wage, the worker may need transfer payment to survive. Walmart.

▲ 3-4

Ruskin shows how Ricardo's formulation breaks down when applied to forms of work that are not directly productive.

Ruskin footnote 21—"The quantity of life"

The quantity of life is the same in both cases; but it is differently allotted. [Back](#)

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↑ **How we should live on the land** Ch4 Sec 14

[notes»](#)

1. Mill recognizes the importance of nature and regrets its destruction, but the need for food, water, and air will ensure the survival of unspoiled agricultural and natural land.
2. As we provide for population growth, we will necessarily prize nature and fields and orchards made beautiful by joyful human labor.
3. As the art of life is learned, it will be found that lovely things are necessary things.
4. While laws can help, human progress toward happiness is individual, centered in the home.
5. People need to be content with their position in life and learn to be happy through hard work, simple living, and the calm pursuit of peace.

▲1 Leaving these questions to be discussed, or waived, at their pleasure, by Mr. Ricardo's followers, I proceed to state the main facts bearing on that probable future of the labouring classes which has been partially glanced at by Mr. Mill. That chapter and the preceding one differ from the common writing of political economists in admitting some value in the aspect of nature, and expressing regret at the probability of the destruction of natural scenery. But we may spare our

anxieties, on this head. Men can neither drink steam, nor eat stone. The maximum of population on a given space of land implies also the relative maximum of edible vegetable, whether for men or cattle; it implies a maximum of pure air; and of pure water. Therefore: a maximum of wood, to transmute the air, and of sloping ground, protected by herbage from the extreme heat of the sun, to feed the streams. All England may, if it so chooses, become one manufacturing town; and Englishmen, sacrificing themselves to the good of general humanity, may live diminished lives in the midst of noise, of darkness, and of deadly exhalation. But the world cannot become a factory, nor a mine. No amount of ingenuity will ever make iron digestible by the million, nor substitute hydrogen for wine. Neither the avarice nor the rage of men will ever feed them, and however the apple of Sodom and the grape of Gomorrah may spread their table for a time with dainties of ashes, and nectar of asps, —so long as men live by bread, the far away valleys must laugh as they are covered with the gold of God, and the shouts of His happy multitudes ring round the wine-press and the well. (81)

▲2 Nor need our more sentimental economists fear the too wide spread of the formalities of a mechanical agriculture. The presence of a wise population implies the search for felicity as well as for food; nor can any population reach its maximum but through that wisdom which “rejoices” in the habitable parts of the earth. The desert has its appointed place and work; the eternal engine, whose beam is the earth’s axle, whose beat is its year, and whose breath is its ocean, will still divide imperiously to their desert kingdoms, bound with unfurrowable rock, and swept by unarrested sand, their powers of frost and fire: but the zones and lands between, habitable, will be loveliest in habitation. The desire of the heart is also the light of the eyes. No scene is continually and untiringly loved, but one rich by joyful human labour; smooth in field; fair in garden; full in orchard; trim, sweet, and frequent in homestead; ringing with voices of vivid existence. No air is sweet that is silent; it is only sweet when full of low currents of under sound-triplets of birds, and murmur and chirp of insects, and deep-toned words of men, and wayward trebles of childhood. ▲3 As the art of life is learned, it will be found at last that all lovely things are also necessary: —the wild flower by the wayside, as well as the tended corn; and the wild birds and creatures of the by every wondrous word and unknowable work of God. Happy, in that he knew them not, nor did his fathers know; and that round about him reaches yet into the infinite, the amazement of his existence. (82)

▲4 Note, finally, that all effectual advancement towards this true felicity of the human race must be by individual, not public effort. Certain general measures may aid, certain revised laws guide, such advancement; but the measure and law which have first to be determined are those of each man’s home. ▲5 We continually hear it recommended by sagacious people to complaining neighbours (usually less well placed in the world than themselves), that they should “remain content in the station in which Providence has placed them.” There are perhaps some circumstances of life in which Providence has no intention that people *should* be content. Nevertheless, the maxim is on the whole a good one; but it is peculiarly for home use. That your neighbour should, or should not, remain content with *his* position, is not your business; but it is very much your business to remain content with your own. What is chiefly needed in England at the present day is to show the quantity of pleasure that may be obtained by a consistent, well-administered competence, modest, confessed, and laborious. We need examples of people who, leaving Heaven to decide whether they are to rise in the world, decide for them selves 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; and honouring themselves in the harmless pride and calm pursuits of peace. (83).

How we should live on the land (Ch4 Sec14)

[text»](#)

▲ 1

“Men can neither drink steam, nor eat stone”

Ruskin's first argument is that the world will always require fertile fields and woodlands, even if England chooses to destroy its own natural environment through industrialization. Ruskin fully grasps the modern idea that we will “live diminished lives” from a degraded natural environment.

▲ 2–3

“fear the too wide spread of . . . mechanical agriculture”

Ruskin's second argument is that even if England can feed itself through mechanical agriculture, a “wise population” will demand natural beauty: “the wild flower by the wayside.” In these passages Ruskin's writing shows us his magnificent eloquence without angry polemics or satire.

▲ 4

Contentment with simple living

Ruskin has begun a shift from planet-level concerns about the environment and sustainability to a focus on individuals and families living lives of simplicity, hard work, and contentedness. Presumably this part of “Ad Valorem” incorporates material from Ruskin's planned essay “The Law of the House.”

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↑ **Let our consumption of goods be equitable and our lives be a force for good** Ch4 Sec 15

[notes»](#)

1. Justice is the fruit of those who make peace, the givers of calm. Business, however, is active and likely contentious. The paths of Wisdom are also those of peace.
2. Wisdom begins in the home. All true economy is the “Law of the house.” Live well but live simply.
3. When you buy, think of the lives of the producers and whether your payment is fair exchange. Think also of the good uses to which your purchase can be put and how soon this can happen.
4. Look for fineness and purity of commodities and don't fail to value good commodities just because they are inexpensive and available to all.
5. In the future luxury may be possible for all. But now your luxury is someone's hardship.
6. Be a force for good until Christ's gifts of bread and peace shall be given to the last one as it is to thee and there is holy reconciliation between the Wicked and the Weary.

▲ 1 Of which lowly peace it is written that “justice and peace have kissed each other;” and that the fruit of justice is “sown in peace of them that make peace;” not “peace-makers” in the common understanding—reconcilers of quarrels; (though that function also follows on the greater one;) but peace-Creators; Givers of Calm. Which you cannot give, unless you first gain; nor is this gain one which will follow assuredly on any course of business, commonly so called. No form of gain is less probable, business being (as is shown in the language of all nations— πωλεῖν from πέλω, πρᾶσις from περάω, venire, vendre, and venal, from venio, etc.) essentially restless—and probably contentious; —having a raven-like mind to the motion to and fro, as to the carrion food; whereas

the olive-feeding and bearing birds look for rest for their feet: thus it is said of Wisdom that she “hath builded her house, and hewn out her seven pillars;” and even when, though apt to wait long at the door-posts, she has to leave her house and go abroad, her paths are peace also.

▲2 For us, at all events, her work must begin at the entry of the doors: all true economy is “Law of the house.” Strive to make that law strict, simple, generous: waste nothing, and grudge nothing. Care in nowise to make more of money, but care to make much of it; remembering always the great, palpable, inevitable fact—the rule and root of all economy—that what one person has, another cannot have; and that every atom of substance, of whatever kind, used or consumed, is so much human life spent; which, if it issue in the saving present life, or gaining more, is well spent, but if not, is either so much life prevented, or so much slain. ▲3 In all buying, consider, first, what condition of existence you cause in the producers of what you buy; secondly, whether the sum you have paid is just to the producer, and in due proportion, lodged in his hands;²² thirdly, to how much clear use, for food, knowledge, or joy, this that you have bought can be put; and fourthly, to whom and in what way it can be most speedily and serviceably distributed: in all dealings whatsoever insisting on entire openness and stern fulfilment; and in all doings, on perfection and loveliness of accomplishment; ▲4 especially on fineness and purity of all marketable commodity: watching at the same time for all ways of gaining, or teaching, powers of simple pleasure, and of showing “ὄσον ἐν ἀσφοδέλω γέγ’ ὄνειρα” —the sum of enjoyment depending not on the quantity of things tasted, but on the vivacity and patience of taste. (84)

And if, on due and honest thought over these things, it seems that the kind of existence to which men are now summoned by every plea of pity and claim of right, may, for some time at least, not be a luxurious one; —consider whether, even supposing it guiltless, luxury would be desired by any of us, if we saw clearly at our sides the suffering which accompanies it in the world. ▲5 Luxury is indeed possible in the future—innocent and exquisite; luxury for all, and by the help of all; but luxury at present can only be enjoyed by the ignorant; the cruelest man living could not sit at his feast, unless he sat blindfold. Raise the veil boldly; face the light; and if, as yet, the light of the eye can only be through tears, and the light of the body through sackcloth, ▲6 go thou forth weeping, bearing precious seed, until the time come, and the kingdom, when Christ's gift of bread, and bequest of peace, shall be “Unto this last as unto thee”; and when, for earth's severed multitudes of the wicked and the weary, there shall be holier reconciliation than that of the narrow home, and calm economy, where the Wicked cease—not from trouble, but from troubling—and the Weary are at rest. (85)

Let our consumption of goods be equitable and our lives be a force for good (Ch4 Sec15)

[text»](#)

▲3

Ruskin footnote 22—middlemen

The proper offices of middle-men, namely, overseers (or authoritative workmen), conveyancers (merchants, sailors, retail dealers, &c.), and order-takers (persons employed to receive directions from the consumer), must, of course, be examined before I can enter farther into the question of just payment of the first producer. But I have not spoken of them in these introductory papers, because the evils attendant on the abuse of such intermediate functions result not from any alleged principle of modern political economy, but from private carelessness or iniquity. [Back](#)

▲4–5p

“not be a luxurious one”

A modern-day formulation of this idea is “Live simply so that others may simply live.”

▲6

“where the Wicked cease”

Job 3.17: “Where the wicked cease from troubling; and there the weary be at rest.”

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Ruskin's Preface

Added in 1862 when Ruskin published *Unto This Last* as a book

SECTIONS

1. The main objective of my four essays was to properly define "wealth."
2. My secondary objective was to show that wealth can only be acquired if there is honesty
3. My policy recommendations are training schools for youth and homes for the old and destitute

↑ The main objective of my four essays was to properly define “wealth” Preface Sec 1

notes»

1. Although these four essays met a hostile reception, I consider them my truest and best work and reprint them here essentially unaltered.
2. But I regret including my proposal to organize labor with fixed wages because my primary concern was to define “wealth.”
3. Mill states—wrongly—that our common understanding of the word is sufficient.

▲ 1 The four following essays were published eighteen months ago in the Cornhill Magazine, and were reprobated in a violent manner, as far as I could hear, by most of the readers they met with. (1)

Not a whit the less, I believe them to be the best, that is to say, the truest, rightest-worded, and most serviceable things I have ever written; and the last of them, having had especial pains spent on it, is probably the best I shall ever write.

“This,” the reader may reply, “it might be, yet not therefore well written.” Which, in no mock humility, admitting, I yet rest satisfied with the work, though with nothing else that I have done; and purposing shortly to follow out the subjects opened in these papers, as I may find leisure, I wish the introductory statements to be within the reach of any one who may care to refer to them. So I republish the essays as they appeared. One word only is changed, correcting the estimate of a weight; and no word is added.¹

▲ 2 Although, however, I find nothing to modify in these papers, it is matter of regret to me that the most startling of all the statements in them, —that respecting the necessity of the organization of labour, with fixed wages, —should have found its way into the first essay; it being quite one of the least important, though by no means the least certain, of the positions to be defended. The real gist of these papers, their central meaning and aim, is to give as I believe for the first time in plain English, —it has often been incidentally given in good Greek by Plato and Xenophon, and good Latin by Cicero and Horace, — a logical definition of WEALTH: such definition being absolutely needed for a basis of economical science. ▲ 3 The most reputed essay on that subject which has appeared in modern times, after opening with the statement that “writers on political economy profess to teach, or to investigate,² the nature of wealth,” thus follows up the declaration of its thesis— “Every one has a notion, sufficiently correct for common purposes, of what is meant by wealth.” . . . “It is no part of the design of this treatise to aim at metaphysical nicety of definition.”³ (2)

Metaphysical nicety, we assuredly do not need; but physical nicety, and logical accuracy, with respect to a physical subject, we as assuredly do (3)

Suppose the subject of inquiry, instead of being House-law (*Oikonomia*), had been Star-law (*Astronomia*), and that, ignoring distinction between stars fixed and wandering, as here between wealth radiant and wealth reflective, the writer had begun thus: “Every one has a notion, sufficiently correct for common purposes, of what is meant by stars. Metaphysical nicety in the definition of a star is not the object of this treatise;”—the essay so opened might yet have been far more true in its final statements, and a thousand-fold more serviceable to the navigator, than any

treatise on wealth, which founds its conclusions on the popular conception of wealth, can ever become to the economist.

Ruskin's Preface

[text»](#)

Summary of the preface

Ruskin acknowledges the hostile reception to the essays he published in *Cornhill Magazine* and defiantly insists that this is his best work. He regrets only that his proposal for fixing wages drew attention from his chief aim, which was to redefine wealth and to show that wealth can only be acquired under certain moral conditions of society—in particular, honesty. Some say that asking for honesty is setting the bar too low, but given the current state of society, simple honest is a high enough aspiration.

Ruskin then outlines his policy recommendations to assure his readers that he is no socialist. Ruskin wants to see government-run vocational training schools for the young and unemployed, and he wants homes established for the old and destitute.

The main objective of my four essays (Ruskin's Preface Sec1)

[text»](#)

▲ 1

Ruskin footnote 1—A new footnote for the second edition (1877)

In this new footnote Ruskin tells us that the only change he is making in the second edition is to expand upon a footnote that appears later in this preface. (This is Ruskin's 4th footnote in Section 2 #5).

An addition is made to the note in the Fourteenth page of the preface of this book which, being the most precious, in its essential contents, of all that I have ever written, I reprint word for word and page for page, after that addition, and make as accessible as I can, to all. [Back](#)

▲ 2–3

The need for a logical definition of wealth

Ruskin is not at all interested helping Mill or other orthodox political economists achieve a more logical or precise definition of wealth. Ruskin's much more radical goal is to supplant their definition with a Humanistic and moral definition of wealth that is more in accord with the Classical authors he sites. For example, Xenophon (in *Oeconomicus*, I) states that a flute is property only to the man who has the skill to play it and that money is property only to the man who can use it to live well. This soon becomes clearer when Ruskin states that the second object of the essays was to demonstrate that the acquisition of wealth is only possible under certain moral conditions of society.

▲ 3

Ruskin footnote 2—when teaching is impossible

Which? for where investigation is necessary, teaching is impossible. [Back](#)

Ruskin footnote 3—quote from Mill about defining wealth

Principles of Political Economy. by J. S. Mill. Preliminary remarks, p. 2. [Back](#)

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↑ My secondary objective was to show that wealth can only be acquired if there is honesty

Preface Sec 2

notes»

1. My secondary objective was to show that wealth can only be acquired under certain moral conditions of society—in particular, honesty.
2. Pope writes that an honest man is the noblest work of God. It is *at least one* of God's noblest works. Honesty is perhaps rare these days, but it's not incredible or miraculous.
3. Honesty is not an aberration. It's a consistent force that prevents chaos.
4. Some say that Pope overvalues honesty. They ask, "Can't we ask man to strive for still more?"
5. For the present, however, it will be enough to recover honesty and keep our faith that there are still honest men.
6. For, the survival of any nation depends on the proportion of its citizens who refrain from fraud out of honesty, not just for fear of punishment.
7. These essays, therefore, focus on wealth and honesty (not labor), because if we have honesty, the organization of labor will come easily.

▲1 It was, therefore, the first object of these following papers to give an accurate and stable definition of wealth. Their second object was to show that the acquisition of wealth was finally possible only under certain moral conditions of society, of which quite the first, was a belief in the existence, and even, for practical purposes, in the attainability of honesty. (4)

▲2 Without venturing to pronounce—since on such a matter human judgment is by no means conclusive—what is, or is not, the noblest of God's works, we may yet admit so much of Pope's assertion as that an honest man is among His best works presently visible, and, as things stand, a somewhat rare one; but not an incredible or miraculous work; still less an abnormal one. ▲3 Honesty is not a disturbing force, which deranges the orbits of economy; but a consistent and commanding force, by obedience to which—and by no other obedience—those orbits can continue clear of chaos.

▲4 It is true, I have sometimes heard Pope condemned for the lowness, instead of the height, of his standard: —“Honesty is indeed a respectable virtue; but how much higher may men attain! Shall nothing more be asked of us than that we be honest?” (5)

▲5 For the present, good friends, nothing. It seems that in our aspirations to be more than that, we have to some extent lost sight of the propriety of being so much as that. What else we may have lost faith in, there shall be here no question; but assuredly we have lost faith in common honesty, and in the working power of it. And this faith, with the facts on which it may rest, it is quite our first business to recover and keep: not only believing, but even by experience assuring ourselves, that there are yet in the world men who can be restrained from fraud otherwise than by the fear of losing employment;⁴ ▲6 nay, that it is even accurately in proportion to the number of such men in any State, that the said State does or can prolong its existence.

▲7 To these two points, then, the following essays are mainly directed. The subject of the organization of labour is only casually touched upon; because, if we once can get a sufficient quantity of honesty in our captains, the organization of labour is easy, and will develop itself without quarrel or difficulty; but if we cannot get honesty in our captains, the organization of labour is for evermore impossible.

My secondary objective (Ruskin's Preface Sec2)

text»

▲2

About honesty as a goal for society

That Ruskin is asking only for common honesty seems to reflect a deep pessimism about British society. Throughout *Unto This Last* he asks for, indeed demands, much more than honesty. Consider, for example, that he requires that merchants be willing to make large sacrifices for the well-being of their employees.

▲5

Ruskin footnote 4—This is the footnote Ruskin expanded in 1877

This quotation from Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* supports Ruskin's comment that we must have faith that people behave honestly for ethical reasons, and not simply because they are afraid to lose their customers. By "corporation," Smith means Medieval trade guilds.

In 1877, Ruskin adds a paragraph fiercely condemning Adam Smith's cynical statement. Then to oppose this cynicism, Ruskin quotes an inscription he found in the Church of Saint Giacomo di Rialto in Venice. Finally, Ruskin tells us (using a reference to his *Sesame and Lilies*) he believes that the strong language in this expanded footnote is appropriate and not stylistic exaggeration.

"The effectual discipline which is exercised over a workman is not that of his corporation, but of his customers. It is the fear of losing their employment which restrains his frauds, and corrects his negligence." (*Wealth of Nations*, Book I. chap, 10.)

Note to the Second Edition. —The only addition I will make to the words of this book shall be a very earnest request to any Christian reader to think within himself what an entirely damned state of soul any human creature must have got into, who could read with acceptance such a sentence as this: much more, write it; and to oppose to it, the first commercial words of Venice, discovered by me in her first church:—

—Around this temple, let the Merchant's law be just, his weights true, and his contracts guileless.

If any of my present readers think that my language in this note is either intemperate, or unbecoming, I will beg them to read with attention the Eighteenth paragraph of *Sesame and Lilies*; and to be assured that I never, myself, now use, in writing, any word which is not, in my deliberate judgment, the fittest for the occasion.

VENICE,

Sunday, 18th March, 1877. [Back](#)

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↑ My policy recommendations are training schools for youth and homes for the old and destitute

Preface Sec 3

notes»

1. I wish to assure the reader that my future direction is not toward dangerous ground. My policy recommendations are no more than the following:
2. First, establish government schools to teach laws of health and exercise, habits of gentleness and justice, and, especially, a trade.
3. Secondly, establish, as part of the schools, factories and workshops that would produce goods of the highest quality.
4. Thirdly, set the unemployed to appropriate work at these government schools for vocational training.
5. Lastly, establish homes for the old and destitute, maintaining them with honor, unless they are responsible for their misfortune.
6. As I elaborate, please consider the difficulty and uncertainties but also the potential.

▲1 The several conditions of its possibility I purpose to examine at length in the sequel. Yet, lest the reader should be alarmed by the hints thrown out during the following investigation of first principles, as if they were leading him into unexpectedly dangerous ground, I will, for his better assurance, state at once the worst of the political creed at which I wish him to arrive. (6)

▲2 (1.) First, —that there should be training schools for youth established, at Government cost,⁵ and under Government discipline, over the whole country; that every child born in the country should, at the parent's wish, be permitted (and, in certain cases, be under penalty required) to pass through them; and that, in these schools, the child should, with other minor pieces of knowledge hereafter to be considered) imperatively be taught, with the best skill of teaching that the country could produce, the following three things:—

- (a) The laws of health, and the exercises enjoined by them;
- (b) Habits of gentleness and justice ; and
- (c) The calling by which he is to live.

▲3 (2.) Secondly, —that, in connection with these training schools, there should be established, also entirely under Government regulation, manufactories and workshops for the production and sale of every necessary of life, and for the exercise of every useful art. And that, interfering no whit with private enterprise, nor setting any restraints or tax on private trade, but leaving both to do their best, and beat the Government if they could, —there should, at these Government manufactories and shops, be authoritatively good and exemplary work done, and pure and true substance sold; so that a man could be sure, if he chose to pay the Government price, that he got for his money bread that was bread, ale that was ale, and work that was work.

▲4 (3.) Thirdly, —that any man, or woman, or boy, or girl, out of employment, should be at once received at the nearest Government school, and set to such work as it appeared, on trial, they were fit for, at a fixed rate of wages determinable every year; —that, being found incapable of work through ignorance, they should be taught, or being found incapable of work through sickness, should be tended; but that being found objecting to work, they should be set, under compulsion of the strictest nature, to the more painful and degrading forms of necessary toil, especially to that in

mines and other places of danger (such danger being, however, diminished to the utmost by careful regulation and discipline), and the due wages of such work be retained, cost of compulsion first abstracted—to be at the workman's command, so soon as he has come to sounder mind respecting the laws of employment.

▲5 (4.) Lastly, —that for the old and destitute, comfort and home should be provided; which provision, when misfortune had been by the working of such a system sifted from guilt, would be honourable instead of disgraceful to the receiver. For (I repeat this passage out of my *Political Economy of Art*, to which the reader is referred for farther detail) “a labourer serves his country with his spade, just as a man in the middle ranks of life serves it with sword, pen, or lancet. If the service be less, and, therefore, the wages during health less, then the reward when health is broken may be less, but not less honourable; and it ought to be quite as natural and straightforward a matter for a labourer to take his pension from his parish, because he has deserved well of his parish, as for a man in higher rank to take his pension from his country, because he has deserved well of his country.”

To which statement, I will only add, for conclusion, respecting the discipline and pay of life and death, that, for both high and low, Livy's last words touching Valerius Publicola, “de publico est elatus,”⁶ ought not to be a dishonourable close of epitaph.

▲6 These things, then, I believe, and am about, as I find power, to explain and illustrate in their various bearings; following out also what belongs to them of collateral inquiry. Here I state them only in brief, to prevent the reader casting about in alarm for my ultimate meaning; yet requesting him, for the present, to remember, that in a science dealing with so subtle elements as those of human nature, it is only possible to answer for the final truth of principles, not for the direct success of plans: and that in the best of these last, what can be immediately accomplished is always questionable, and what can be finally accomplished, inconceivable.

Denmark Hill,
10th May, 1862

My policy recommendations are (Ruskin's Preface Sec3)

[text»](#)

▲1

“lest the reader be alarmed”

Although Ruskin is politically ultra-conservative and has a hierarchical, anti-democratic vision of the organization of society, he recognizes that his demand for social justice can be interpreted as something akin to socialist thought. Here he seeks to prevent this interpretation.

▲2–5

Ruskin's proposals for social programs

In general Ruskin does not look much to government (or to philanthropy) for improving the lives of the poor or for achieving social justice. Instead, he wants to see a broad and deep moral transformation of society. But in these passages Ruskin does propose government programs for high-quality public education (especially vocational education) for youths, vocational training for out-of-work adults, and provision for people in their old age. In different ways and to differing degrees we do have programs answering many of these needs. For example, we have social security rather than old-age homes. Of the ideas Ruskin proposes here, the only that has been least put into practice is government-run factories and work shops produced goods of exemplary quality in direct competition with the private sector.

Ruskin footnote 5—on education and crime

It will probably be inquired by near-sighted persons, out of what funds such schools could be supported. The expedient modes of direct provision for them I will examine hereafter; indirectly, they would be far more than self-supporting. The economy in crime alone, (quite one of the most costly articles of luxury in the modern European market), which such schools would induce, would suffice to support them ten times over. Their economy of labour would be pure gain, and that too large to be presently calculable.

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▲4

“being found objecting to work”

Ruskin has no sympathy for people who are lazy.

▲5

Ruskin footnote 6—“de publico est elatus”

He was buried at the public's expense. [Back](#)

▲6

“what can be . . . immediately . . . and finally accomplished”

Ruskin usually speaks from a stance of surety, not hesitancy. But he ends the passage on a euphoric note of optimism.

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Appendices

↑ Appendix A: References and further readings

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Editions of Ruskin's *Unto This Last*

Included with list of notable editions of *Unto This Last* is the Library Edition of all Ruskin's writing.

- *The Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*. Ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. London: George Allen, 1903–12. Available online at <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/users/ruskinlib/Pages/Works.html>.

This is a complete collection of all of Ruskin's work, including his incidental writings and his correspondence. For each work there is ample introduction and very detailed notes. In many cases, Ruskin's own engravings are shown. The notes for *Unto This Last* (in Volume 17) are especially valuable because in addition to providing sources for Ruskin's many Biblical and literary allusions, the editors provide cross-references that make important connections between passages of *Unto This Last* and passages in Ruskin's other works.

- *Unto this Last*. Ed. P.M. Yarker (Collins Annotated Student Texts). London and Glasgow: Collins, 1970. This edition, unfortunately out-of-print, provides very detailed notes. It was intended for undergraduates and the British equivalent of high school students.
- *Unto This Last and Other Writings by John Ruskin*. Ed. Wilmer, Clive. London: Penguin Books, 1997. Also available as an eBook. This is an excellent edition with detailed notes and a substantial, valuable introduction. The edition includes a selection of works by Ruskin that have a strong connection with *Unto This Last*.
- *Unto This Last*. ed. Susan Cunnington (Kings Treasuries of Literature). London & Toronto: M. Dent & Sons. New York: E.P Dutton and Company, 1921. Also a "students" edition.
- Cunnington provides good notes and in her notes and commentary displays a strong political engagement and a passionate appreciation of Ruskin as a writer and thinker. This is my personal favorite among the editions of *Unto This Last* and in many ways the model and inspiration for my own notes and commentary. Available online at https://openlibrary.org/works/OL15644042W/Unto_this_last

References for this edition

The scholarly and interpretation literature pertaining to Ruskin and *Unto This Last* is enormous and very varied, and so I do not attempt a list of recommended readings. I have certainly benefited greatly from reading within this body of literature, but here I cite only sources to which I am indebted for specific insights.

- Fain, John Tyree. *Ruskin and the Economists* (Nashville, Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 1956). This book, to which I am much indebted, remains invaluable for understanding Ruskin's ideas in relation to nineteenth century (and later) economic thinking. See Fain for a detail discussion of how Ruskin challenged the economic theorists of his day.
- May, Christopher. "John Ruskin's Political Economy: 'There is No Wealth but Life.'" *BJPIR The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*. 12 (2010): 189-204.

↑ Appendix B: Gandhi's Paraphrase of *Unto This Last*

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In 1906 Gandhi, already a committed activist in South Africa and India, was given a copy of *Unto This Last* on the platform of a railway station in Johannesburg to read on his train trip. Gandhi describes its impact:

The book was impossible to lay aside, once I had begun it. It gripped me. Johannesburg to Durban was a twenty-four hours' journey. The train reached there in the evening. I could not get any sleep that night. I determined to change my life in accordance with the ideals of the book.

Gandhi tells us the main lessons he drew from the Ruskin:

1. That the good of the individual is contained in the good of all.
2. That a lawyer's work has the same value as the barber's inasmuch as all have the same right of earning their livelihood from their work.
3. That a life of labour, i.e., the life of the tiller of the soil and the handicraftsman, is the life worth living.

The first lesson Gandhi learned is what it means to live a successful life. People should not focus on individual gain but on the betterment of society. Or, as Ruskin says ([Essay Four, Section 11, #7](#)), “that man is richest who, having perfected the functions of his own life to the utmost, has also the widest helpful influence, both personal, and by means of his possessions, over the lives of others.”

The second lesson pertains to social justice. Regardless of occupation, everyone should earn enough to live a rewarding life. Therefore, we need to value individuals without regard to their occupation.

The third lesson is that working with one's hands is good work and that everyone should spend some time doing manual labor. Part of this lesson is to reject the poisoned fruits of industrialism and large-scale “mechanical agriculture” and instead to live a life of simplicity, relying as much as possible on home-made garments and home-grown food. Ruskin, by the way, was very serious about the value of manual labor. For example, when he became a professor of art at Oxford, he required his very privileged students to join him in repairing local roads.

In 1908 Gandhi serialized a nine-part paraphrase of Ruskin's book into Gujarati in *Indian Opinion*, a periodical he edited, and he later published it as a pamphlet under the title *Sarvodaya* (“The Welfare of All”). The purpose of the paraphrase was to make the book more meaningful and relevant to his audience in India, and for this same reason, Gandhi wrote a short, but highly significant, concluding section. Valji Govind Desai retranslated Gandhi's paraphrase into English in 1951 under the title *Unto This Last: A Paraphrase* and revised it slightly in 1956. It is available [here](#).

It is worthwhile to consider what is changed and omitted from Gandhi's paraphrase (as translated back into English). Gandhi's paraphrase is much shorter. In fact, Essay 4 (“Ad Valorem”), the longest essay in the book, is radically condensed to two pages. Also, Gandhi eliminated passages dealing with topical issues of Ruskin's day and eliminated many of Ruskin's literary and Biblical quotations and references. Finally, Gandhi consistently looks for ways to shorten and simplify *Unto This Last*.

For example, in this passage from the second paragraph of Essay 2, "The Veins of Wealth," we see that Gandhi moves swiftly and smoothly, conveying admirably Ruskin's core idea:

Pardon me. Men of business do indeed make money, but they do not know if they make it by fair means or if their money-making contributes to national welfare. They rarely know the meaning of the word "rich". At least if they know, they do not allow for the fact that it is a relative word, implying its opposite "poor" as positively as the word "north" implies its opposite "south".

However, looking at the original (below), we see that Gandhi omitted Ruskin's three striking metaphors of the card game, the gambling house, and the dark streets vs. lighted rooms and also Ruskin's key (though repeated) distinction between mercantile economy and political economy:

Pardon me. Men of business do indeed know how they themselves made their money, or how, on occasion, they lost it. Playing a long-practised game, they are familiar with the chances of its cards, and can rightly explain their losses and gains. But they neither know who keeps the bank of the gambling-house, nor what other games may be played with the same cards, nor what other losses and gains, far away among the dark streets, are essentially, though invisibly, dependent on theirs in the lighted rooms. They have learned a few, and only a few, of the laws of mercantile economy; but not one of those of political economy. Primarily, which is very notable and curious, I observe that men of business rarely know the meaning of the word "rich." At least, if they know, they do not in their reasonings allow for the fact, that it is a relative word, implying its opposite "poor" as positively as the word "north" implies its opposite "south."

Gandhi's version and Ruskin's original were written for very different audiences and provide very different experiences.

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