

Marxism and the Moral Law

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IN his recent book *Why I am not a Christian* Bertrand Russell discusses the grounds and validity of moral judgment. He says that some things are morally right and some morally wrong just as some things are blue and some are yellow. He holds these judgments to be absolute. He offers no ground for this conviction other than his own powerful subjective feeling, or moral intuition that it is so. Elsewhere he elaborates this somewhat. "Since no way can be even imagined for deciding a difference as to values, the conclusion is forced upon us that the difference is one of tastes, not one as to any objective truth." When we make such a judgment "we are giving expression to our own emotion, not to a fact that would still be true if our personal feelings were different."

In point of fact while reflection or theory forces Russell to this position, it is not one that he is at all consistent about. He constantly assumes in his writing on social issues a belief in the validity of the moral ideals which should guide history, he clearly holds the view that his moral judgments are superior to those of the movements and men he unsparingly condemns. He would not for a moment, *in practice*, concede that cruelty is wrong for him, but right for someone else. He says that since the age of thirty-eight he has been committed to such values as freedom, happiness, kindness and justice, and *not* as mere personal tastes, but as modes of behaviour which he feels everyone *ought* to follow and which he will roundly condemn when departed from.

What this means is that Russell accepts these standards as universal, absolute and authoritative, but does so purely on the basis of subjective feeling.

Reviewing this book in the *Observer*, Philip Toynbee says, "If one is convinced that cruelty is absolutely wrong, and not because it detracts, in the long run, from the greatest happiness of the greatest number, then it is hard to see where this absolute comes from unless from something or someone outside and superior to ourselves." Now while the condemnation of cruelty is to the general advantage, I agree that we do not condemn it for that reason. We condemn it, for instance, if practised against ourselves. We do *feel* it, in every individual instance, to be wrong in itself. Now, why? Does that moral judgment

require authenticating from outside human experience, does it necessarily imply "something or someone outside and superior to ourselves"? Kingsley Martin agrees with Toynbee and in the *New Statesman* calls for "the justification of his (Russell's) humanist faith" and calls for a solution to the problem of "the origin and justification of" faith in good.

This is not a purely speculative question for Marxists, because their own refusal to accept any transcendental standard for ethics and their assertion that morals are strictly relative to social conditions and change with them, is the reason for the strong ethical condemnation of Marxism. In fact it is this ethical objection which is one of the most influential and strongly felt. The most powerful motives among men are moral motives. Moral enthusiasm, moral repudiation and indignation are the driving force of history and that is why they are mobilised in full force against Communism.

Critics of Marxism

It is therefore asserted that since Marxists admit of no other morality than that relative to the political victory of the working class they have in fact repudiated morality and discarded all regard for human life and other human values.

Some critics are fair enough to recognise that none the less Marxists do assert that their aims are higher than those of their opponents, but they hold this to be completely inconsistent with an avowed class morality, since there is no outside standard whereby to make this judgment. Merely to make one's own interests the standard of moral judgment is obviously unethical, as we all see it would be if slave-owners made their interests the sole criterion of right and wrong. If working class interests are more moral than owning class interests it is not just because they are *our* interests and we are determined to have it so. There must be a reason, a moral ground, other than the fact that it is *our* interests we are concerned with. This is a perfectly fair argument. There must be such a ground. What is it? And if we affirm some moral ideal such as "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" as the ground, what is the ground of that ground? Or is it sufficient to say with Russell—I feel it in my bones and that is an end of it? If that is not

sufficient are we required to find "something or someone outside and superior to ourselves" to justify this standard?

Criticism can be carried one stage further. If the only valid moral criterion is the political victory of the working class, then whatever conduces to that victory is legitimate, the end justifies any means. The only escape from such a position would be the acceptance of standards of right and wrong *independent* of class interests, which might preclude the use of certain measures in attaining socialist ends. But by definition there are no other standards, the *only* standard of right is victory and therefore everything that leads to victory must be right.

Basis of Right and Wrong

Now in considering these criticisms what we have to decide first is what is the basis of right and wrong. Before we state the Marxist view, let us look at the alternatives.

First of all then, Russell's simple assertion that he *feels* cruelty, or whatever it might be, to be absolutely wrong. Without disputing his judgment, is his moral intuition, his feeling that this is as certain as that blue is blue, this verdict of his conscience, adequate ground for accepting such a judgment? Obviously not, as Russell himself sees, for it only tells us something about Russell's own feelings and, as he says, what he feels cannot be, just because he feels it, authoritative for anyone else. This is obscured when we take as our example something we generally agree about, but even if a sadist says that he has no feeling of repulsion about cruelty, *our* feeling of repulsion has not the slightest authority for him. In point of fact once we step outside generally accepted ideas of right and wrong, conscience and feelings do most violently clash—conviction about race superiority for instance, or the right to unearned income, or pacifism. Since Russell finds himself refusing to allow to others the right to judge as right what he judges as wrong, and this is what he does when he condemns all sorts of things which to other people seem right, or approves what they condemn, he has obviously abandoned his own criterion, and so does everybody else sooner or later.

Are we compelled to say then that this judgment derives its validity from "something or someone outside of and superior to ourselves"? Russell himself has answered this in the very book which Toynbee reviewed (but obviously Toynbee never read that essay!) It has also been answered many times before and is, in fact, an exploded fallacy. How are we to judge whether the authority for a moral law is superior to us,

for only if he is can we assert that authority? On moral grounds, of course, because He, God, is good. In that case either we know what good is before we judge that God is good and therefore accept his authority, or we say that He is good because there is no standard of right other than what he commands, which is arguing in a circle.

In point of fact the argument itself bears witness to the fact that we are dealing with two separate things—God and goodness, and attributing goodness to God. In other words goodness must have a meaning independent of God. The same argument holds of any Abstract Principle, or Moral Law. We accept it because we judge it to be right. We cannot accept it just because it is imposed upon us. Mere force or non-moral authority has no power to *make* anything right.

This is a very old question. It was first asked by Plato in the *Euthyphro*: "Is it right because the gods command it, or do the gods command it because it is right?"

Of course our very ethical agnostics are in this matter more orthodox than Christian theology, which whatever its faults, is pretty good on pure logic (because they learned it from Aristotle), for the church holds that moral distinctions are antecedent to the divine commandments. Right is not right because God wills it, but God wills it because it is right. This must be very disappointing to Mr. Toynbee.

What then *is* the basis of right? Let us try again. Is it as the Utilitarians and the French *philosophes* said, *just whatever conduces to human happiness? Is it just self-interest?* Certainly not. Because we know perfectly well that it is not always right to do what we please. Pleasure and duty are not, unfortunately, always the same thing. Right too often requires us to run counter to our personal interests, to contradict our impulses, to face all sorts of deprivations and unpleasantness.

Is it then *the greatest happiness of the greatest number?* But why should I concern myself with other people's happiness? Why subordinate my interests to the common good? An ideal that transcends actual interests is nobody's business. A general good is not necessarily good for me.

If a man simply refuses to accept the obligation to sacrifice himself for the common good, there is no *reason* why he should.

The argument assumes of course that individual happiness is desirable and is what all have a right to seek. Therefore the most satisfactory state of affairs is when we are all happy. But this is no reason for my sacrificing my happiness that others may be happy, for, by definition, the only good

thing is individual happiness. "From each for self to each for all there is no road."

The Good and the Morally Right

We had better start again, and let us do so by drawing a distinction between what is good, valuable, desirable, and what is morally right. Lots of things are good, and it may also be right that we should have them, but not necessarily. Health and food and shelter and love and friendship and holidays and nice clothes are good and it is right that I should have them. Here good and obligation coincide. But under certain circumstances I may feel it my duty to forgo something that is good. I may sacrifice my legitimate pleasures to satisfy the needs of my family, or in the service of a cause.

It is extremely important to start off by recognizing that the good is nothing abstract but just everything that satisfies human needs and desires from simple things such as we have mentioned to all those new and growing needs like television sets, washing machines and Continental holidays. There are things that we want, sometimes individually, and sometimes, like dancing and holidays, along with other people. The only criterion of goodness here is that we want them. As the philosopher Spinoza said, "We do not desire things because they are good, they are good because we desire them." We do not need to find any other reason for choosing such things other than the mere fact that we do choose them. Good things are by definition those things that we choose, that we prefer.

And here we have, as we have already noted, the first kind of *obligation*. A man has a duty to himself. A man has a *right* to these things and he ought to feel very strongly about it and not let anyone cheat him of them. He ought to fight for what is good and defend his goods. And all that is highly ethical.

But important and fundamental though this is we have not yet come to the *heart* of the moral problem, and that, of course, is the kind of obligation that constrains us to forgo these legitimate desires. On the firm basis that we have laid down, *why should I forgo anything?*

It has been widely believed that I must do so in deference to certain general moral principles, but it is precisely the authority and validity of such principles that are in question. In fact it must be conceded that no such principles exist independent of and prior to experience. If we recognise them it is because we have ourselves formulated them on the basis of human experience. Whatever authority they have

is therefore based on human experience. They certainly come to be felt as self-existent and transcendent and immutable, but they are not, and all sorts of difficulties and mistakes follow the belief that they are.

This means that the obligation to restrain our natural impulses and forgo our legitimate desires arises from social experience. Exactly how this happens is a matter of great importance for (a) it shows *how* the *authority* of morality arises, (b) *how far* that authority goes and when it ceases, and (c) why it has such a powerful influence on the mind, why it is *felt* intuitively as a *categorical imperative*.

The answer to this problem is to be found in anthropology and psychology. Two sciences with which moral philosophers are seldom acquainted, hence their inadequate treatment of this, the crucial question of ethics.

Quite simply, as human society develops it does so in certain specific and highly complex forms. In any primitive community we find a set of institutions, special forms of production and exchange, marriage customs, intricate and detailed procedures and rules and taboos, fixed habits and traditions.¹

Social Experience

These methods of living, traditions and institutions impose on the members of the community a whole range of obligations which are strongly impressed upon all by the tremendous force of tradition. Tribal life is thus very authoritative and compulsive and various ceremonial and ritual means are adopted strongly to impress these customs and obligations on members of the tribe. Magic, religion, taboo, totemism, tribal ritual, fertility, marriage and initiation rites all strongly impress the imagination so that a feeling of authority and sanctity, of categorical obligation is created and built up within the mind of each individual. He is thus constrained by an overwhelming feeling that he *must* obey these rules and he feels terribly guilty if he does not. The psychologist calls this social conditioning, the Freudian speaks of the creation of a super-ego, we call it conscience or moral intuition, it is all the same thing.

¹ All this has been described with great wealth of detail for a large number of primitive communities by anthropologists intimately acquainted with them through long residence in their midst and familiarity with the language. However different these customs are, and they are widely different, each is a viable, interconnected system of social life which maintains itself successfully. Space forbids a catalogue of such studies.

The same social pressure gradually turns an amoral child into a more or less responsible member of society. Social pressure at work, in the family, in school, in the profession, in the ship or regiment or factory, effects the same social conditioning. Thus arises the sense of obligation which may, if of the *first order*, represent a powerful social drive to attain goods for ourselves, individually or collectively; these we call our *rights* and they have powerful ethical force. If they are of the *second order* they impose restraints compelling us to forgo these things in the interests of society, of others; these we call our *duties*.

Strong feelings of moral obligation are thus engendered backed up by social approval and disapproval, embodied in fixed habits, rules, actual laws and finally finding expression in codes of morals, precepts, sermons, stories, plays, poems, dramas, pictures, which powerfully reinforce them.

The appearance of this moral-complex of ideas and institutions is effected by evolutionary pressure. A community thus welded together in mutual support, with strong feelings of social obligation, with powerful restraints on sex, on violence, on covetousness and indiscipline, with firm family regulations and marriage customs has considerable survival value.

This reduction of the complex problem of morality to the simpler forms found in primitive society is instructive. It shows three things:

1. That the basis of all morality is the satisfaction of human needs, *in society*, by the working of disciplined social institutions.
2. All moral obligations thus have a *rational basis*, for every individual profits by the successful working of society and by the duties and restraints imposed upon its members.
3. But this does not mean that the rational perception of this general utility would in itself be enough to make a man do his duty. Only intense social conditioning and the building up of *character* and an integral personal ideal or ego ideal, an organised and integrated personality,¹ will suffice for that. And so there emerges the tremendous compulsion of moral principle which can lead men to acts of heroic self-sacrifice, to the faithful and onerous performance of daily duty.

Social Needs and Moral Obligations

The basing of all moral obligation on social needs and social utility has been elaborated from

¹ See Hadfield, *Psychology and Morals*, and Flugel, *Man, Morals and Society*.

the Marxist point of view by Howard Selsam in his *Socialism and Ethics*, but Selsam has been criticised by Franz Loeser, a German Marxist, on the grounds that this is not a Marxist treatment at all, but idealist, subjectivist and pragmatist.² Loeser argues that the only basis for morals is conformity to the *laws of social development*.

1. Certainly there is a moral obligation to conform to *all* scientific laws including those of social development and Marxism is the only system which makes the social necessity of the latter plain and insists on their importance.
2. But all science, both physical and social, exists and has significance only because it satisfies human needs. The prior and fundamental obligation is to satisfy these. Science and social law are *instrumental* and therefore secondary not prior.
3. Of course needs are subjective. How could they be otherwise? There can be no other basis for human activity and social organisation than the satisfaction of human needs, as Marx himself repeatedly said. Dislike of pain, desire for food and drink, are necessarily felt subjectively just as are the perception of tastes, sounds and colours. They are none the less objective for that. Surely this is a case of the dialectical interplay of subjective and objective.³
4. To reduce all human activity, psychology and morals to conformity to law, *excluding human needs* (or what is the same thing reducing them without remainder to the *need* to conform to social law) seems to me a terribly mechanical, inhuman, abstract and non-Marxist attitude.

Marxism must begin therefore with the basing of all obligation on the satisfaction of human needs. It proceeds to show what are the necessary conditions for the satisfaction of these needs, and thus new moral factors appear, new obligations and duties dependent upon the requirements of the situation in our period of capitalist contradiction and class struggle. This step in ethical development brings us to the class ethics of the workers. Since they can only fulfil their needs by

² "The most unkindest cut of all!" No one more than Howard Selsam has strongly criticised pragmatism from the Marxist standpoint.

³ *The German Ideology*, p. 16. "The first premise of all human existence, the premise namely that man must be in a position to live in order to be able to make history. But life involves before everything else eating and drinking and habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs." (Our italics.)

the overthrow of capitalism this becomes a moral aim and the means to its achievement become moral too.

Two important consequences follow:

1. This class morality is far more than a class morality for two reasons:
 - a. The victory of the working class is of benefit to all humanity.
 - b. The removal of class contradiction for the first time makes possible the achievement of universal aims long given lip-service to by all men including the bourgeoisie, but which were incapable of realisation within a class system.
2. A tremendous moral conflict breaks out between the sacred principles of the bourgeois which they hold to be *right* because they secure their interests, and the revolutionary principles of the workers which contradict these bourgeois standards. Of course the bourgeois rights will be defended by *absolute ethical principles*, as they must appear to the bourgeoisie; the sacred right to rent, interest and profit, laissez faire freedom, property and all the rest of it. The workers deny the validity of these values and advance their own which they hold are ethically sound—"He that will not work neither shall he eat," down with all freedoms that enslave men, individual ownership of the means of production is anti-social, and in general the whole socialist criticism of the acquisitive society of capitalism.

Conclusions

We thus see that the difficulties and objections concerning Marxist ethics are all answered.

1. Moral standards of an objective kind are advanced which are based on human needs.
2. They change with changing conditions, but this very relativity is their strength and makes them authoritative. "It is because morality is always and in all places relative to circumstances, that it is binding to any time and place."
3. Working class morals are not purely relativistic, but have universal validity because they break the deadlock of bourgeois morality in the interests of all mankind.
4. The ideal aims of socialists are therefore not inconsistent with their class aims or with the relativity of their ethics, because they are judged not by an *outside* standard, but

by the maximum welfare of the human species.

4. Moral standards not only can be and are produced *within* society, but only have meaning and significance if they are so produced. The idea that to have validity moral principles must be independent of the social progress they are to measure morally is bad ethics, bad logic, bad anthropology and bad philosophy. *All* standards in science, in art, in economics, in medicine and in society are necessarily produced within society.
6. Finally on the *means-end* controversy, Marxists hold that only those means are legitimate which in securing a classless society do not lose more than they gain in the process. They evaluate means not by absolute standards but *by consequences*. For absolute standards often turn out to be merely the attaching of supreme values to bourgeois interests. Or else, either through soft-headedness or unconscious class motivation, absolute adherence to a Moral Principle (like pacifism) is advocated in spite of the fact that the result is far more suffering than if it were violated. This is not a highly moral procedure, but an unmoral one.

Nevertheless Marxists are well aware that such general principles as the sacredness of human life, truthfulness, pity are of enormous importance; if one *has* to set them partially and temporarily aside there will be a real diminution of the good secured, that will be part of the price of victory and it may be a heavy one.

The Marxist is, however, able to add that if the course he adopts is *not* followed because of fidelity to these moral laws, then these moral laws themselves will be violated to a greater degree than is required by the class struggle, as is seen plainly enough in the consequences of allowing capitalism and imperialism with all their exploitation and cruelty and violence to continue; whereas victory in the class struggle at the cost of some always regrettable and deplorable evil consequences has the ultimate effect of permitting at last the fullest achievement of these very ideals in the history of mankind. Hence we find in Marxism "The categorical imperative to overthrow all conditions in which man is a degraded, servile, neglected, contemplated being." (Marx.)