

The Objective Criterion in Ethics

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COMRADE LEWIS is to be congratulated on focusing attention on one of the most important theoretical problems in Marxist ethics, namely the formulation of the objective criterion in ethics. An objective criterion I define as that basis, which exists independently of human consciousness, and upon which man forms his ethical value judgments and deduces his morality, i.e. that basis upon which man evaluates his social being (activities, ideas, institutions etc.) as to whether they are good or bad.

Pre-Marxist ethics could not develop a truly objective criterion. On the one hand, we have the theory that the good is derived from some supernatural and absolute power. This is the theory of ethics as expressed by Plato and the religions. On the other hand, we have the theory that the good is relative to human feelings, desires, interests, utility, specific circumstances etc. This is the theory of ethics of subjective idealism. The first ends in mysticism, the second in solipsism. Neither have an objective criterion. Even the so called objective criterion of objective idealism does not exist outside human consciousness. God is a figment of the human imagination.

These two theories characterise basically the whole of pre-Marxist ethics. But very often forms of the relativist theory of ethics (subjective idealism) are incorrectly interpreted as materialist or even Marxist theories. Thus Kautsky in his book *Ethik und materialistische Geschichtsauffassung* just as Howard Selsam in *Socialism and Ethics* maintains, for instance, that the struggle in ethics in ancient Greece was the struggle between the idealist ethics of Plato and the materialist ethics of the Hedonist Epicurus. However, Hedonism is a pure form of subjective idealism. The struggle in ancient Greece, in the field of ethics, was not between a materialist and an idealist theory, as it was in natural philosophy, but between objective and subjective idealism, the reflection of the struggle between the aristocracy and the new middle-class. Greek materialism was too mechanical and metaphysical to allow for

materialist ethics. Equally the French materialists, although possessing a higher form of materialism, were not able to produce materialist ethics. True, their ethics contain materialist aspects, but in the end, they always fall back into subjective idealism. Engels summed up this type of materialism when he said of Feuerbach that he was a materialist in the field of natural philosophy, but in his ethics an idealist.

The reason for the inability of ruling classes, prior to the working class, to produce consistent materialist ethics, even in their progressive phase, is easily explainable. Consistent materialist ethics can only be created on the basis of dialectical materialism, the only basis which can explain the development of society and human consciousness and therefore morality, as determined by social laws, existing independently of human consciousness or will. But no previous ruling class dared to discover the laws of social development, which would prove its inevitable death. Therefore they could neither create a consistent materialist ethics, nor discover the one and only objective criterion, on which in the last analysis, man bases his ethical value judgments and morality, namely conformity with the laws of development of society.

However it is no mere accident that Kautsky and Selsam interpret various forms of relativist ethics as materialist, because their own theories contain forms of this subjective idealism. Comrade Lewis chides me for this criticism as being "unkind" to Selsam. Indeed, I have the highest regard for Selsam and his fight, yet this must not prevent me from criticising his obvious pragmatist formulations in his theory of ethics, whether this may be unkind or not, just as I feel bound to express my criticism of Lewis's theory, who adopts similar formulations.

Comrade Lewis begins his article by asking himself what is the "moral ground" of morality, and he declares that the only "moral criterion" for the working class is its political victory. (I am not sure what Lewis means by "moral criterion"

or "moral ground", but assume he means criterion of morality.) This he finds untenable, because it involves the ends and means controversy, justifying any means to that end. The difficulties which Lewis faces right at the outset do not result from the fact that a genuine problem here really exists, but that he incorrectly formulates the objective criterion. If we ask ourselves, how do we know that the victory of the working class is good, we must answer: because it is the only way for mankind to progress, i.e. because it conforms with the laws of development of society and mankind. We cannot answer (as we should if we accept Lewis's formulation of the objective criterion): the victory of the working class is good, because the victory of the working class is good. We see, therefore, that the statement: "the victory of the working class is good", is a value judgment on the basis of a truly objective criterion. It is a perfectly correct statement and value judgment, but not the objective criterion in ethics itself.

Lewis's Subjective Idealism

Mistaking however a value judgment for the objective criterion, he attempts to surmount the various difficulties arising from it, by attempting to define the basis of right, a question which by the way he never answers. Now the category of right does not, properly speaking, belong to the sphere of ethics, but Lewis overcomes this difficulty by speaking about the morally right. But why this manoeuvre? The answer lies in his definition of good. For Lewis, good is anything that we desire, prefer or want. He says: "The good . . . is just everything that satisfies human needs and desires." "The only criterion for goodness here is that we want them (things, F.L.)." "Good things are by definition those things that we choose, that we prefer." Thus according to Lewis we only have to want it, and everything becomes good. Selsam, however faulty and pragmatic his formulations may be at times, never stoops as low as that! To reduce the good to individual desire, want, preference etc., is anarchy. It denies every objective and scientific criterion of the good, and plays right into the hands of our class enemies. It is just about the crudest form of subjective idealism possible, and that under the cover of Marxism!

Perhaps Lewis senses this, and now his manoeuvre to introduce the category of right will become clear, because he attempts to objectify his theory by introducing a distinction and contradiction between the good and the morally right. While the good is anything we want and desire, the morally right implies obligation to forgo our desires. Thus there exists, according to Lewis, a contradiction between what

is good, and what is morally right. Lewis explains the development of that obligation to forgo desire, through experience, basing himself on Freudian psychology. Space does not allow me to discuss this part. But in any case, it seems immaterial, because this tortuously erected contradiction between good and morally right falls down of its own accord when he declares: "Marxism must begin with the basing of all obligation on human needs." As the good is defined in the same terms, and the essence of the whole distinction is obligation, the argument negates itself. Before proceeding, however, one of Lewis's arguments should be noted in this connection. In his attempt to examine the validity of moral principles, he attacks the assertion of the transcendency and immutability of moral principles. No Marxist would disagree. But this attack turns out to be a cover, reminiscent of John Dewey, for smuggling a pragmatist epistemology in by the back-door. He declares: "If we recognise them (the principles, F.L.) it is because we have ourselves formulated them on the basis of human experience. Whatever authority they have is, therefore, based on human experience." Certainly morality, just as all human consciousness, is derived through experience. That does not for one moment mean, that its validity, its criterion of truth, is this experience! Experience does not create truth or reality, as the pragmatists would have it, but experience merely confirms objective reality, which exists independently of experience, and is reflected in the human consciousness. There are some experiences which may help us to see truth and the moral values of things, and others which may prevent us from doing so. The truth, validity and authority of the moral principle that all workers should support the Communist Party as the leading party in the struggle for socialism, does not depend on our experience, nor whether we agree with it or not, but on the fact that this principle reflects objective reality independent of our consciousness or will. Experience merely confirms its truth. But when Lewis makes its validity and thus its criterion of truth dependent on experience, he introduces a subjectivist theory of knowledge, a theory which denies the objective basis of morality and by implication, the objective basis of all knowledge.

The fact is, that no contradiction exists or can exist between good and morally right. When we declare that a thing is good, we make an ethical value judgment of some aspect of our social being, on the basis of an objective criterion. We thus create the basic form of ethical consciousness, the ethical value. Morality comprises the rules of social conduct which arise out of the

ethical value judgments, out of the concept of good. Morality reflects man's attempts to realise these ethical values, and is therefore a further development of these values, of the concept of good. Morally right is that which conforms to the rules comprising morality. Thus in the sense that morality bases itself on the good and attempts to realise it, it cannot contradict it. The basic distinction which Lewis formulates between the good and the morally right is, that the latter implies obligation to forgo desire. Yet a good deed may imply exactly the same obligation. A contradiction cannot therefore exist between these two concepts. No, the contradiction does not lie there, but in the fact that Lewis's definition of the good contradicts all the facts. It just is not true, that the good is that which we desire, want or prefer. Here lies the contradiction and the crux of Lewis's whole subjectivist theory of ethics. But in an attempt to save himself from this impossible theory, he introduces this contradiction and attempts to prove it by his pragmatic "theory of experience".

Lewis's "Basis of Morality"

The reader will have noticed, that Lewis has so far given us a rich variety of objective criteria, e.g. political victory, anything we want, desire, or prefer, the obligation to forgo desire, and experience. His article actually contains a considerable number more, but space allows me to discuss one more only, i.e. his "basis of morality". Lewis declares: "The basis of all morality is the satisfaction of human needs. . . ." But what does Lewis mean by the basis of morality?

Morality, as a specific form of human consciousness, arises in its most general sense, out of the whole of the social being of man, of which satisfaction of man's needs is most certainly an important part. More specifically, morality as part of the superstructure is determined by its specific basis, which also determines the nature of man's needs.

Yet when we have said this much, we have not got beyond the most general statements of Marxist philosophy. We have not at all touched on the real problem in ethics, which is to decide what is good and bad. An explanation of the general basis of human consciousness and activity gives us a starting point from which we can solve this problem, but it is no solution of the problem itself. To say anything of importance in ethics, we have to formulate that basis or objective criterion, upon which man evaluates his activity, his social being, whether it is good or bad. Such an evaluation includes amongst other things the evaluation, through that objective criterion, of our

needs; which needs are good or bad, which needs it is good to satisfy and where a satisfaction of needs would be bad. The fact is, that one of the reasons for the development of morality is precisely because man can never satisfy all his needs. It is the purpose of the rules of social conduct comprising morality, to determine (amongst other things), which needs are to be satisfied, and which not. This, man can only do, by having an objective criterion on which he evaluates the satisfaction of his needs. Logically, this criterion cannot be the satisfaction of the needs themselves. The satisfaction of the needs of the capitalist for profit are not good. Equally in socialist society, as indeed in all societies, we have many conflicting needs. To satisfy those which do not conform to the laws of development of our society, would be bad and immoral. Thus the mere satisfaction of a need, does not make the need nor the satisfaction good. The basic objective criterion of good is, therefore, not the satisfaction of man's needs, but the conformity to the laws of development of society and mankind.

We see, therefore, that the category of the general basis of human consciousness and morality, and the objective criterion, are two distinct problems, which Lewis apparently does not distinguish. Thus if Lewis means by the "basis of morality", the general foundation of human consciousness, his formulation is at best inadequate and inferior to the formulation given by Marx and Engels, and what is more adds nothing to an explanation about ethics. If, however, he talks about the issue at hand, and means the objective criterion in ethics, his formulation is false. In making the satisfaction of human needs the criterion of morality, he is again forced to deny the objective nature of morality, and falls back into subjective idealism, as was apparent in his definition of the good, which was, as the reader will remember: "anything that satisfies human needs and desires." And after all, that cannot but be otherwise, for there cannot be a distinction between what is good and the objective criterion of what is good.

Because of lack of space, I cannot deepen my critique, nor touch on what I feel to be other important mistakes in Lewis's theory. The rest of the space available to me, I wish to use as an attempt, however inadequate it must be under the circumstances, to give the barest outline of the basic development of ethical consciousness.

Lewis accuses my theory, among other things, of being "non-Marxist" and "inhuman". He comes to this conclusion because I supposedly "reduce all human activity and morals to conformity to law, excluding human needs", and make it the only "basis" for morality. These accusations are

not backed by a single quotation and Lewis relies solely on his own interpretation of what I say. The fact is that Lewis is able by these means, to completely misinterpret and vulgarise what I actually say, which is probably partly due to his own confusion, referred to above, of the distinction between the category of the general basis of human consciousness, which is the whole of the social being of man, and the objective criterion, upon which man evaluates this social being.

The Objective Criterion in Ethics and the Development of Ethical Consciousness

I define the most basic objective criterion in ethics as: All that is good which conforms to the laws of development of society and mankind. All that is bad which violates these laws. This is better or worse, which conforms or violates these laws to a greater or lesser degree.

Man may ignore this criterion, be unconscious of it or consciously violate it, but this does not destroy the criterion, the laws, or the objective character of the good, but only himself.

In defining this standard upon which man evaluates most basically his social being, his activity, his needs, his institutions etc. I am not in any way giving an explanation, as Lewis implies, of how this activity arises or develops. The criterion itself is not an explanation of how consciousness and morality arises. It is but a part, an aspect, in the process of the development of ethical consciousness itself. But because Lewis confuses these two issues, he is therefore able to assert, that I reduce all activity to "conformity to laws" (a vulgarised version of my criterion) when actually, I am defining that standard upon which man but evaluates his activity. Nor do I assert, as Lewis implies, and as will become quite clear in the course of my argument, that all that is good which "conforms to laws".

Human consciousness arises as a reflection of objective reality in the process of the whole of man's activity, particularly his working activity. (Pavlov, rather than Freud or other bourgeois psychologists, gives us a correct explanation here.) Ethical consciousness is a specific form of this consciousness. The basic form of ethical consciousness is the ethical value judgment. The ethical value judgment (e.g. "Socialism is good") is an evaluation of the various forms of social being on the basis of an objective criterion. An ethical value is, therefore, subjective in the sense that it is a form of consciousness. It is objective, not only in the respect that it reflects objective reality, but in that it is based on an objective criterion. Morality as the rules of conduct, basing themselves on ethical value judgments, represent

a further form of development of ethical consciousness.

Morality arises specifically out of the contradictions inherent in the development of every society. Morality is a form of consciousness which attempts to overcome these contradictions. Thus a moral rule is more than a value judgment. It contains a directive, which, in the last analysis, indicates to man how to conform to the laws of his social development. Yet the very moment man is able to conform to his morality, to conform to the laws of his development, new contradictions arise, new laws have already developed. Thus there must always be evil, and therefore morality as those rules of conduct trying to overcome evil. If there was no evil, i.e. contradictions violating the social development of man, there would be no morality, which implies at the same time, that there could be no development. So much for Lewis's assertion that I reduce all activity and morals to conformity to laws. It is precisely, because man can but incompletely conform to the laws of his social development, that morality arises.

Morality is neither absolute nor purely relative. Bourgeois sociologists in agreement with Selsam and Lewis declare: "Morality is always and in all places relative to circumstances. . . ." "This very relativity is their strength and makes them authoritative." (Lewis page 59.) Because they are purely relative to circumstances, the bourgeois sociologists conclude from this logically, that no comparison can be made between socialist and capitalist morality, nor between working class and capitalist morality. The reasoning is obvious. If morality is purely relative to circumstances and not part of an objective process of development, determined by objective laws, and therefore only valid to these circumstances, then by what standard can it possibly be compared? Socialist working class morality is therefore not higher or better than capitalist morality, so they assert. This reactionary relativist theory is false, precisely because morality is not purely relative to circumstances. Morality develops from lower to higher forms, parallel to the development of society itself. With the development of each higher class or society, new and higher conditions, relations, contradictions and laws come into operation, and old ones die. Through the process explained above, new and higher values and morality must therefore arise. Equally with each higher form of basis, man acquires a greater insight into the laws of his development and a greater ability to conform to them. Therefore, each higher class and society produces also a higher morality. Therefore, morality being a process from lower to higher forms, determined

by objective laws, is not purely relative to circumstances, nor does it derive its validity or authority from these circumstances. Lewis tries to save himself from this relativism by stating: "Working class morals are not purely relative . . . because they break the deadlock of bourgeois morality in the interests of all mankind." But working class morals, just as any other morals, are never purely relative to circumstances, not because they break the deadlock in the interests of mankind, which they admittedly do, but because they are part of a progressive process, determined by objective laws. (Naturally this is difficult to explain, if one makes the basis of morality the satisfaction of one's needs and desires.)

Bourgeois morality, too, broke the deadlock of feudal morality in the interests of all mankind. Its development and its morality, just as any other, is determined by objective laws. Yet the fact that it is determined by objective laws does not mean that, therefore, its morality is good today. The objective criterion states: that is good which conforms to the laws of development of society and mankind, and not: that which conforms to laws. At the time of the overthrow of feudalism, the development of the bourgeoisie conformed with the laws of development of society and mankind as a whole. Its morality was therefore good. Today, its development violates the laws of development of society and mankind. Its growing immorality is the surest sign of its imminent death. Today, the development of the working class conforms to the laws of development of mankind, and its morality is therefore good. Working class morality, by showing man

how to conform to the laws of development of society, helps him to solve the antagonistic contradictions of class society forever, which he solves by creating Socialist society. But in doing so he creates new and higher conditions, new laws come into operation, new contradictions arise, and a new and higher morality develops. The process continues on a higher level.

But does the individual in his daily life attempt to evaluate his ethical value judgments on the basis of the basic objective criterion in ethics? Not as a rule. His criterion are the laws of his own personal development which he recognises to the degree of his own personal development, which is in turn ultimately determined by the level of the development of the basis of the society that he lives in. Yet this does not imply relativism in our daily judgments. The development of the individual always proceeds as a member of a social group, and the development of every group is finally based on the development of the class and society. Thus, just as the development of the individual is basically determined by the development of society, so is the criterion of the individual based on the basic objective criterion as formulated above.

That leaves only one conclusion for us today. The harder we attempt and actually succeed in understanding the laws of development of society, the harder we attempt and actually succeed in conforming with these laws, the better human beings must we become in the course of it. That means fighting with all our power, actively and scientifically, as members of the Communist Party for the aims of the working class, for peace and socialism.

Discussion on "Angry Young Men"

Marxism the Way Out

Timothy Enright

ARNOLD KETTLE in his article "Rebels and Causes" has examined that recent and much publicised phenomenon, the Angry Young Men. This cult has supplanted that of the Middle Aged Growlers, a typically British product which has held the stage for some years, and which under the leadership of such stalwart Knights of the Brandished Thistle as Gilbert Harding and J. B. Priestley has launched campaign after campaign, unflinching and unsparing, against the numerous

blots and eyesores which disfigure our civilisation. Woe betide the rude taxi-driver, or British Railways whenever they served cold coffee! These were the practical revolutionists, men of robust British character, champions of British norms of decency, standers of no nonsense.

The A.Y.M. are of a different stamp. They have wallowed away into a mystical mistiness, searching with soulful sensitivity for a new Grail. They need to travel light and have eased themselves of such