

# Marxism and the Moral Law

*George Burgher*

IN the February issue of *Marxism Today*, Dr. Lewis has succeeded in dealing with a very complicated subject in the compass of one short article. Where such compression has been achieved without sacrificing his usual lucidity it would be wrong to cavil at individual turns of phrase. However, several points he raises seem worth further consideration.

He suggests at the beginning of his analysis of ethical imperatives that we should draw "a distinction between what is good, valuable, desirable and what is morally right"; and then, somewhat illogically, goes on to argue that the first kind of obligation a man has is a duty to himself. He ought to fight for those goods to which he has a right. Since men have in any case so natural a propensity to satisfy their own desires, ethical terms can only be introduced into such a context at the cost of distorting their usual meaning. Then, at a subsequent stage of his argument, Dr. Lewis is faced with the problem of raising on this subjective base of human wants an objective structure of moral responsibility.

## The Good and the Right

The difficulty could have been obviated by recognising from the start not the distinction between what is good and what is right but the connection. In calling upon auxiliary disciplines like psychology and anthropology to help elucidate questions of moral philosophy no Marxist can afford to overlook the assistance of economics itself—particularly since such concepts as "value" and "goods" are common to both studies. "There can be," as Dr. Lewis says, "no other basis for human activity and social organisation than the satisfaction of human needs." What is good is simply whatever is produced by common industry to meet certain desires; and these goods change as society develops and new satisfactions become possible. But from the moment men organise themselves to make anything at all they are involved in relations of production and it is here that duties and rights arise. The obligations they acknowledge also change from one stage of economic development to another, just as the productive relations themselves vary. Now these relations of

production refer primarily to questions of distribution and the whole purpose of production is, of course, consumption; but production, distribution and consumption are all merely different aspects of one and the same process. Therefore these two concepts of good and right must also be seen as simply reflecting two sides of the same human activity which includes both desiring and, because those desires can only be realised through social co-operation, responsibilities to others.

This dialectical relationship is also to be seen in Marx's analysis of the commodity which is the form goods take in all more or less advanced societies. It has to be recognised as at once a useful thing and also as a value—that is, as an embodiment of human labour. If our subjective judgments are concerned with the former aspect, the perfectly objective labour theory of value refers to the latter; and so here, again, we get the same polarisation between the good, as satisfaction of demands, and the right, as respect for the efforts of others in achieving their satisfaction as well. They represent a distinction within a social whole and their intimate connection is brought out by our assumption that price and value ought to equal each other. Surely this is one way of apprehending that dialectical interplay of subjective and objective which is suggested in the article as a resolution of the differences between Selsam and Loeser.

## Class Morality

Near the end of his discussion Dr. Lewis says: ". . . 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 . . ." and he adds: "if the course he (the Marxist) 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. . . ." Now this is a very romantic notion of the Marxist jeopardising his own soul to save others, acting against his true beliefs in the name of those very beliefs themselves; but will it really do? These "general principles" and "moral laws" over and above the class struggle have a

bourgeois look about them in spite of the criticism the author has just been levelling at such absolute standards. One can only suppose that what he actually meant to point out was that ideal sentiments may appear rather different once they have been translated into an active effort to change the world we live in.

To the charge that Marxism is a class morality the simple answer is that no morality in a class-riven society can be otherwise. The interesting problem is why the more narrowly based ethics of the bourgeoisie should issue forth in the widest of generalisations and claims to universal validity. To understand this characteristic it is only necessary to recall the dialectic of knowledge with its respective phases of sense-perception, concept-forming and active application of those concepts to the real world. The mechanical reaction of stimulus and response at the lowest stage corresponds roughly with an unconscious primitive morality. At the next stage concepts formed by the mind in operating on its environment become sufficiently detached for abstract thought which, as Lenin pointed out, creates at once the conditions of human knowledge and the possibility of idealism. That possibility becomes a reality in the historical situation of a division between intellectual and manual labour. The rupture between theory and practice leads to the complete cutting off of concepts from their real origins to assume an arbitrary independence which makes it superficially plausible to deduce nature from the idea instead of the other way about. Once this perversion has occurred it serves so obvious a class interest in postulating as transcendent and eternal the values of a dominant section of society that every effort is made to arrest development at this particular moment. It is from the nature of these freely floating concepts separated from all reality that idealistic ethics draws its notion of a limitless and meaningless individual freedom. Only at the third stage of re-application

to the material world of the abstract ideas derived from it can this whole fantastic, topsy-turvy ideology be righted and set on a proper foundation again.

### Ideas in Theory and Practice

In his recent book, *Marxism and the Open Mind*, Dr. Lewis is very critical of fellow Marxists for condemning idealists as reactionary whatever their historical context. Plato is instanced as one example of this deplorable tendency. And yet Plato, though he certainly sharpened the conceptual tools of speculation and made considerable contributions to philosophical thought, provides a classic case of the way abstract ideas can be used to oppose social progress. Reaction is a political term and it can be applied to many who may in this respect or that have advanced some particular branch of learning; it must be applied to all idealists because idealism by its very nature cheats us with the substitution of shadow for substance and, by denying the need or possibility of real change, is always on the side of the Establishment. "The conflict between idealism and materialism, arising as it does from the very process of human knowledge and to that extent universal, thus appears throughout the course of history with different contents determined by the specific social formation in which it occurs." (Desanti, J.-T., *Introduction à l'Histoire de la Philosophie*)

It is not a question, then, of Marxists having to sacrifice certain ideals in achieving their ends. It is simply that ideals in theory, ideals at the stage of mere utopian projection, and ideals in practice, ideals involved in a real struggle, may not always be immediately identifiable. This can be an important consideration for intellectuals of the Left in a relatively static situation. They can so easily become obsessed with what looked to them like defections from socialist morality in those places where the fight to establish socialism is actually in progress.