

## Soviet-British Discussions on Problems of Ethics

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SOVIET-BRITISH DISCUSSIONS  
ON PROBLEMS OF ETHICS

In November 1970, four Soviet philosophers, two from the Institute of Philosophy, USSR Academy of Sciences (L. N. Mitrokhin and O. G. Drobnitskii) and two from Moscow University (Iu. K. Mel'vil' and A. S. Bogomolov) were in England for the purpose of continuing the discussion with British philosophers begun two years earlier. [See previously translated reports in Soviet Studies in Philosophy, Winter 1970-71 — Editor.] Like the previous trips, this one was organized by the Association of Soviet Friendship Societies and the British Society of Friends (Quakers).

Our stay in England included four days of discussion on a mutually agreed program in the suburban Plough Hatch Hall club (near East Greenstead). This was followed by visits to the universities of Sussex, Oxford, and London and meetings and conversations with a large number of British philosophers. Our opposite numbers in the discussions were David Bell (University of Glasgow), Stephen Lux and Alan Ryan (Oxford), Philip Greer (Keele University, Staffordshire), and Gerald Quine (University College London). In addition, Richard Hare, one of the principal

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representatives of analytical linguistic ethics, which has long been dominant in Britain, came down to Plough Hatch Hall for one day from Oxford. Having learned of the reports on the content of our previous meetings and debates (1), he wished to participate personally in the discussion with Soviet philosophers (and it turned out that the first day of the discussion was devoted entirely to a polemic with him).

The discussion on the overall theme, Moral Values and Social Development, encompassed a multiplicity of questions and was at the same time a logical continuation of the earlier debates. A distinctive aspect of our third meeting was that now we not only had a good idea of the fundamental points of difference between the Marxist position and the positivist-analytical tradition in ethics, but, after repeated refinements in identification of the positions being upheld and of the differences that arose, we understood each other perfectly, as well as the logic of the argumentation on each side. If one adds to this the fact that we often had to speak without a translator (although, by agreement, each side was to have spoken in its own language), it will be understood that our theoretical contact on this occasion had an even more direct, vital, and productive character.

It is too early at this point to draw final conclusions about our discussions (we expect that British philosophers will again visit our country this year, to continue the unfinished discussion). However, it is possible to single out certain of the sharpest issues in the discussion, chiefly associated with the question of the practical, social, and personal significance of the philosophy of ethics.

The standpoint of analytical ethics on this problem (advanced by Hare, for example) resolved essentially to the following. The philosophy of ethics is capable only of making clear to people the meaning of the moral questions arising before us in life — that is, to render notions precise, to differentiate between moral questions strictly speaking and others (political, economic, technical, esthetic), and to clarify the logic of moral reasoning; in other words, to provide people with "instruments" for discussion of problems that only they can solve. This last notion has

fundamental methodological significance for analytical ethics. It is presumed that any given decision of a moral problem and a person's adoption of a given moral position cannot be adequately grounded in objective and scientific terms (after all the "facts" are known, the choice of principles remains a matter of personal preference). Each individual has to solve "his own" problems for himself personally, with consideration of the fact that this is only his personal decision, although it is "universalizable" (he is prepared to recognize the possibility that all others may take the same position — a variant on Kant's categorical imperative), but it has no binding or preferential significance for anyone else. In general, in the realm of morality, there are no "right" decisions and choices deriving unambiguously from any objective grounds, and therefore the philosophy of ethics, being a science, must not contain (or justify) moral statements.

The Soviet philosophers, recognizing the importance of the methodological, logical, and formal technical tasks of ethics as a science, strove to demonstrate that the practical significance of the philosophy of ethics might be considerably broader. Of course, on the historical plane, the moral problems of human existence and the life of society are resolved, in the final analysis, not by theorizing philosophers but by all human beings, in groups, each class and individual for itself. But these "solutions" (if we talk about the shaping of universally valid moral norms and principles) have entirely definite foundations — the objective demands of social life, the need to harmonize the behavior of human beings, the potential for the further development of society and, in the final analysis, the laws of the motion of history. And whereas on each occasion, the individual decision (let us say, the choice of a principle) is the duty and responsibility of each individual separately, the task with which the morality of the individual is charged lies not in explaining his subjective preference, but in making the right choice, which has equally binding significance for all others. Ethical principles are "universalizable" not only in the sense that certain formal possibilities are admissible (everyone might practice the principle I profess, but they might just as validly prefer other principles,

holding them to be possible for others). This interpretation of the ethical problem essentially also contradicts the logic of the moral requirement (its universally binding nature and the responsibility of the human being to make a correct choice) and the sociohistorical function of morality, which is above all a social institution called upon to harmonize the action of many people. Ethical principles are "universalizable" in the sense of the real opportunity, need, and necessity for human beings to work out universal norms of behavior. The conflict among class systems of morality is waged precisely around the question of which of them is historically justified on the worldwide scale of all humanity (and not merely preferable to someone individually or within the confines of a particular social group).

Thus, the philosophy of morality can have practical significance, not only in the sense of formal methodology, but also in that of ethical content only if, in the first place, it examines morality, not merely as the sphere of purely personal questions of some particular individual, but as a social institution performing highly definite social functions; in the second place, it is not confined purely to formal analysis of moral language, but includes in its examination the general laws of development of human society, the historical needs of social existence, and the real mechanisms of morality reflecting these laws and answering to these needs; in the third place, it takes as point of departure the possibilities of scientific explanation, deduction, validation, and criticism of moral positions and propositions.

May I observe that in the course of the polemic with Hare, certain of the British philosophers were inclined to agree with us on some matters and, for their part, expressed doubt about, if not criticism of, certain of his positions. In the final analysis, the debate resulted in a "cornered" situation, in which an influential philosopher, possessing a simply virtuoso technique of argumentation, was compelled to evade direct answers and counterarguments, having become "besieged" on all sides by his opponents. Let it be recalled that, two years earlier, we had heard from Englishmen that British philosophy of ethics divided along the lines of who was for and who against Hare.

The situation is somewhat different today, when Hare's position is regarded by many as obsolete and is subjected to criticism with increasing frequency. Under these circumstances it is all the more important that the conceptions of linguistic ethics, of which Hare continues for many to be the embodiment, found itself faced by a Marxist position, arguing a critique of formalism and advancing positive answers, which found a lively response and acute interest on the part of the British philosophers.

In the days that followed, we discussed many problems on different planes. Among them were morality and society; social, technological, scientific, and moral progress; the concept of the nature and essence of man and historical changes in it; the genesis of ethics; and the possibility of validating the communist ideal. We had previously discussed some of these questions from different points of view. On the final day of the discussion we returned to the problem with which the discussion had begun. The same question was then put somewhat differently.

What is the social and moral responsibility of the philosopher of ethics in society? Let us assume that this philosopher, being a citizen and ethical personality, has, like all human beings, definite political convictions, participates in social activity, and in his own life decides his ethical problems in some definite fashion (all agreed that this has to be the case). But does this responsibility affect the region of the philosopher's own theoretical positions? What does his moral philosophy give people? What is the ethically significant sense and meaning in his concept of morality? In other words, is the philosopher as scientist, thinker, and specialist on ethics capable of offering people any fundamental, generalized (naturally, not claiming the role of didactic moral teachings and a ready-made solution to each individual problem) solution to the ethical problems of the epoch or of giving some general foundation for the solution of more concrete questions? Or does the philosopher, like everyone else, resolve moral problems purely as a private individual, unrelated to his position in theory, and accordingly for himself alone?

In posing this question to our British colleagues, we had in mind all our previous debates and the skeptical attitude with

which our statements about the scientific and practical significance and potentials of theoretical ethics were opposed. We were answered approximately as follows. Philosophical skepticism with regard to the possibility of rational justification of moral judgments and with respect to objective evidence in favor of the exclusive validity of one of the ethical positions encountered in the contemporary world, and the fact that the philosophy of ethics refrained from moral assertions are a recognition of the sovereign freedom of each to choose his own position. This is a safeguard against attempts on the part of some to impose their convictions on others and a sort of guarantee or salvation against moral authoritarianism.

Understanding the sources of this kind of posing of the question (associated with the peculiar situation and position of the liberally thinking intellectual in the Western world), we, however, expressed ourselves rather sharply against this interpretation of the problem of freedom and authoritarianism. In our opinion, it is utterly illegitimate to confuse freedom of moral choice with the fundamental impossibility of attaining a uniquely correct solution. Authoritarianism in ethics is by no means identical with recognition of a single truth and the possibility of providing objective rational validation for it. Rather, the precise opposite is the case. It is he who discards all rational arguments and has recourse to concealed psychological manipulation or outright pressure of will who "imposes" his preferences. In ethics, freedom of choice has in the final analysis the meaning that each must himself find, recognize, and validate a correct position, for which he is responsible. Were the opposite the case, and if everyone's individual solution were equally justified, moral choice simply would make no sense, and there would be nothing to resolve in matters of morality. Voluntarism in ethics disorients the individual in today's complex world, in which opposite moral positions clash, and a personal attitude to the effect that moral principles are a matter of arbitrary choice ultimately makes a person helpless against the antihuman principles that are so often pressed upon him.

A reader of the previous reports on our discussions will be

in a position to note that the discussion constantly returned to the cardinal ethical problems that had previously arisen — on the relationship of objective truth and subjective position in morality, on what derives from class and what is generally human, on knowledge and evaluation, on history as an objectively law-governed process, and on value criteria as a means of examining history from the point of view of morality.

Our trips to various British universities had a somewhat different character and significance. We were convinced that the discussions that had occurred, despite the rather limited number of direct participants, did produce ample echoes in the universities, including Oxford, the greatest center of philosophical thought in England today, as was manifested by the heightened interest in our group.

In order to explain this interest, it is necessary, of course, to go beyond the bounds of the rather specialized event represented by our three-round discussion and to attempt to understand the unique situation that has presently come into being in the British philosophy of ethics. There is no question as to the fact that the analytical linguistic ethics that had dominated in the British Isles for a decade and a half is now in an acute crisis and is being subjected to criticism. However, this is happening from within, as it were, from positions differing little from the methodology of British linguistic positivism that has rooted itself deeply in the minds of philosophers. Thus far, conceptions meaningful and comprehensive enough to fill the vacuum created have not yet been advanced. There is clearly dominant a feeling of dissatisfaction with formalism and lack of ethical content, with narrow specialization on "technical" questions and the inability of the analytical philosophy of ethics to raise itself to discussion of problems of world view. But the critique of the dominant tradition, paradoxical as this may seem, fundamentally continues to remain within the tenets of the "traditional" methodology and within the confines of those very techniques of posing and interpreting questions. And this further sharpens the self-critical states of mind among youthful and certain more mature teachers, not to speak of the students.



Under these conditions, there has been a rather significant rise, in British universities, in interest in Marxist philosophy and ethics – very close attention and an as yet cautious, probing attitude toward Marxism, which we encountered in conversations with students and teachers.

There is a final point to which we should like to make special reference. The work of the Society of Friends played a major role in making such meetings and discussions possible and fruitful. In organizing such international contacts, the Quakers proceed from a deep and sincere conviction that under circumstances of acute ideological and political conflicts at the level of social class and intergovernmental relations, direct personal contacts, and frank discussions of even the most disputed problems are of major significance. And it must be stated that the organizers of our discussions demonstrated in reality that they themselves pursued precisely those goals. The good organization of all undertakings, the great concern shown for us, the willingness to meet us halfway in everything that had to do with trips and contacts, the creation of a climate of friendship and goodwill during the conversations at the universities as well: all this also had great significance. Without giving broad publicity to our discussions (this is entirely in the Quaker tradition), the Society of Friends was nevertheless able to draw the attention of many university philosophers to the discussions that occurred, by translating into English and circulating materials about them to past and future participants in the meetings. All the members of our group have a warm feeling of gratitude personally to Alan Davis, the Society of Friends' Secretary for European Affairs, who did much to make our trip interesting and successful.

#### Note

1) The reports on the preceding discussions on moral philosophy, which took place in England in 1968 and in Tbilisi in 1969, that were published in Voprosy filosofii (1969, No. 2 and 1970, No. 5) were translated into English by the Society of Friends.