

Discussion on Philosophy

Philosophers and their Problems

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MAURICE CORNFORTH'S "Philosophy, Criticism and Progress" in the October 1957 issue of *Marxism Today*, is an article which confuses rather than clarifies the theoretical questions it attempts to deal with.

For example, Cornforth lays many traps for the unwary in the course of his "thinking aloud" about the nature of philosophy, by failing to make clear when he is describing the views of various historical schools of philosophy and when he is giving us the Marxist view on philosophy.

He quotes Engels with approval,

"That which still survives, independently, of all earlier philosophy is the science of thought and its laws—formal logic and dialectics. Everything else is subsumed in the positive science of nature and history."

—but himself gives upwards of ten definitions of philosophy many of which do not agree with this Marxist position. Such statements as "The subject matter of philosophy should be defined in terms of the kind of questions philosophers try to answer", and "Philosophy questions and criticises the general assumptions underlying the current ideologies of society", may be correct statements of the way in which logical positivists and other schools have defined the scope of philosophy, but they are not within miles of Marxism.

There is, however, a more basic source of confusion. The author purports to be a materialist, but in fact makes considerable concessions to idealism.

For Marxists the distinction between these two points of view in philosophy is vital. Engels wrote,

"The great basic question of all philosophy, especially of modern philosophy, is that concerning the relation of thinking and being."

And in his *Materialism* Lenin shows that all philosophers can be classified into two fundamentally opposed schools according to how they tackle this question of the nature of reality:

"The fundamental philosophical trends are materialism and idealism. Materialism regards nature as primary and spirit as secondary; it places being first and thought second. Idealism holds the contrary view. This root-distinction between the 'two great camps' into which the philosophers of the 'various schools' of idealism and materialism are divided Engels takes as the corner-stone."

And Lenin maintains that there can be no compromise between these two schools,

"either materialism consistent to the end, or the falsehood and confusion of philosophical idealism."

With this in mind let us look at Maurice Cornforth's soliloquy. In the course of this he says,

"The *measure* of the general progress of society is the *growth of productive technique and knowledge*. . . . In this sense progress is not a matter of opinion or preference but of *ascertainable fact*."

Thus far we can agree; but he continues,

"While it may be suggested that technique and knowledge provide the *objective basis* and *measure* of progress I do not think that these concepts *exhaust* what we mean when we speak of progress, not merely as something which happens and can be measured but as something *desirable* to strive for. . . . What evidently counts is not technique and knowledge in themselves but the *way of life* they enable people to *enjoy*. And here we are beginning to speak of things which *cannot* be measured, and to introduce *moral* rather than factual considerations." [Italics in this and other quoted passages are *all* Cornforth's.]

In the course of his remarks Cornforth has switched from a materialist to an idealist standpoint. This can be seen most clearly if we look at what he says in the light of Lenin's answer to the question, "What is meant by a definition? It means essentially to bring a given concept within a more comprehensive concept." The most comprehensive concepts possible to man are those of being and thinking, matter and sensation. Beyond these it is not possible to go. It follows that the ultimate, the fully comprehensive definition of any concept must for a materialist be in terms of physical being and matter, for an idealist in terms of thought and sensation. The unbridgeable gulf between these two sets of ultimate concepts reflects irreconcilable views on the nature of reality.

On which side of this fence is Cornforth, in the above passage? Unmistakably the idealist. For in his definition of the concept of progress moral considerations, themselves unmeasurable, take precedence over material, factual considerations. The objective concepts of technique and knowledge in terms of which human progress is at first defined are themselves specifically subordinated to the subjective concept of an enjoyable way of life.

Cornforth gives philosophy the important task of examining these unmeasurable moral considerations in terms of which we are to assess human progress.

"Philosophy contributes to progress also by dealing with *the ends which we try to make our material progress serve*, and helps to formulate *the purposes which by our material progress may be realised.*"

This completely erroneous view of what philosophy is about (compare it with Engels' classic definition quoted above) is itself further evidence of the idealist nature of the path Cornforth is treading. But his handling of the concrete issue of the class struggle provides, I think, the conclusive proof.

Cornforth points out that when Marx says that history is the history of class struggles this does not mean only that from time to time one class delivers a blow against another, but that

"Progress takes place, marked by such things as increase of productive power, increase of knowledge and development of those ways of life embraced under the terms 'civilisation' and 'culture'."

and that this happens

"not independently of class struggle but through class struggle."

So far so good; but now he wavers,

"A historian can therefore . . . assess the various historical actions not solely in terms of how they promoted some particular class interest but of how they promoted general human progress."

And a later passage completes his ruin,

"A philosopher's contribution may transcend class interests in the narrow sense. It may not be exhausted by ideas which do no more than serve a particular class at a particular time . . . but may also include ideas which serve and in their development continue to serve the general interests of human progress."

This last passage is categorically wrong, and can be shown to be so on Cornforth's own evidence. For if progress only takes place through class struggles then actions and ideas which advance the interests of the class which is the standard bearer of progress at any particular time and place must, of necessity, be identical with actions which promote general human progress.

For a consistent dialectical materialist it is impossible for a situation ever to arise in which the interests of general human progress differ from the interests of the particular class which is carrying the banner of progress at that time. Yet Cornforth does admit this possibility as soon as he allows that there can be ideas which serve general human progress in addition to those ideas which serve a particular class at a particular time. A second yardstick has in fact been introduced whereby actions and ideas may be judged and this clearly allows for the possibility of a clash.

It is not difficult to see that such reasoning can be put forward as a justification for deserting the interests of the working class in a time of crisis.

The way in which Cornforth puts his argument tends to obscure the fact that he is attempting to revise basic Marxist theory; for he never directly contradicts the Marxist position. Rather he attempts to by-pass it. The critical stage at which the leap from materialism to idealism is made is concealed from the unwary by the introduction of an "end", which proves to be idealist, the attainment of which is made possible by strictly materialist "means" (e.g. "the end which we try to make our material progress serve").

When Comrade Cornforth, widely accepted as a leading Marxist theoretician, throws doubt and confusion upon problems that have been resolved for fifty years, it is little wonder that we have yet to smash the crumbling bastions of bourgeois thought in this country, and win the intellectuals to our side.

CORRECTION

In the Discussion contribution by Franz Loeser in our last issue, a correction sent by him was inadvertently omitted. On page 155, right-hand column, the first paragraph should read:

"Morality arises specifically out of the contradictions inherent in the development of every society. Morality is a form of consciousness which indicates to man how to overcome these contradictions, by showing him the correct way of his conduct. Thus a moral rule is more than a value judgment. It contains a directive, which in the last analysis indicates to man how to overcome the contradictions, and how to conform to the laws of development of society. Yet the very moment man is able to conform to his morality, to overcome the contradictions of his development, to conform to the laws of development of society, new contradictions arise, new conditions and laws have already developed. It is precisely because the development of society cannot proceed without contradictions, that there must always be evil, and morality as the rules of conduct trying to overcome evil. Thus as long as society develops, or one could equally say exists, contradictions will exist, which man has to overcome to conform to the laws of development of society. So much for Comrade Lewis's assertion that I reduce all morals to the conformity of laws. It is precisely because man can but incompletely conform to the laws of development of society that morality arises."