

## Discussions Between Soviet and British Philosophers on Problems of Ethics

O. G. Drobnitskii

To cite this article: O. G. Drobnitskii (1970) Discussions Between Soviet and British Philosophers on Problems of Ethics, *Soviet Studies in Philosophy*, 9:3, 237-246

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2753/RSP1061-19670903237>



Published online: 20 Dec 2014.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1



View related articles [↗](#)

---

O. G. Drobnitskii

DISCUSSIONS BETWEEN SOVIET AND  
BRITISH PHILOSOPHERS ON PROBLEMS OF ETHICS

A group of Soviet philosophers (1) visited England from September 21 to October 4, 1968. There they participated in discussions on problems of the philosophy of morality. The trip was organized jointly by the Alliance of Friendship Societies (of the USSR) and the Society of Friends (Quakers) in England. The British Society of Friends (William Barton, Chairman; Alan Davis, Secretary for European Affairs) has long been conducting a diversified program of international cultural ties and personal contacts. The Quakers hold the latter to be particularly important in achieving mutual understanding among peoples. This was, however, the first meeting of philosophers of our two countries.

According to the program agreed on beforehand, a discussion with British teachers of philosophy was held for five days in a suburban trade union center, a onetime castle not far from East Greenstead in the south of England. The participants were David Bell (Glasgow), John Benson (York), Colvin Williamson (Swansea), and Nigel Dower (Aberdeen). Upon arrival in London, the Soviet group broke up. A. F. Shishkin, L. N. Mitrokhin, and V. S. Nesterov went to Scotland, where they had meetings with philosophers in Glasgow and Edinburgh. Iu. K. Mel'vil' and the present author were faced with an

unanticipated situation. The Oxford professors who had invited us cancelled their invitation at the last minute, citing the exacerbated political situation in Europe. Having heard the sincere regrets expressed by our English colleagues in the discussions, and their critical comments on the unreasonable decision taken at Oxford, we took advantage of Mr. Benson's invitation to visit York and his home, where we were received with great cordiality.

Thus, instead of visiting Oxford, we went to York, where we saw one of the very newest universities, picturesquely situated near a medieval town containing the most ancient monuments of architecture, and we were able to visit the University of Leeds as well. Then we again crossed the country from north to south and found ourselves in Brighton, where the University of Sussex has quite recently been built. At the same time, the three other members of our group, having returned from Scotland, had already had conversations with faculty at the University of London and with those from Oxford who, despite the decision of their university, wished to meet with the Soviet philosophers. Among those who expressed disagreement with the refusal of their university to receive us was one of the most prominent of British philosophers, Alfred Ayer. He invited the two members of our group who had not gone to Oxford to visit his house in London.

The meetings and discussions, both those planned beforehand and those which took place spontaneously, kept us more than busy. Our schedule was filled to the limit. Our brief visits to the universities had an inevitable shortcoming: a meeting of two or three hours, on subjects that came up spontaneously, together with the extraordinary number of questions that philosophers meeting for the first time desired to discuss, left upon the participants an impression of a certain reticence and of a mutual failure to understand one another fully. Nevertheless, these meetings served, as it were, as a continuation of the discussions begun at the trade union center near East Greenstead. For all their individual differences, the British philosophers spoke, with minor exceptions, about very similar

matters and, without knowing it, often repeated each other. The reasons for this unanimity are rooted in the country's philosophical climate.

By this date, many English philosophers are expressing a critical attitude to the linguistic approach to ethics, but this still influential school dominates the minds even of those who disavow it. Not only terminology and language but the manner in which problems are posed and discussed remain essentially unchanged. A peculiar combination of empiricism and formalism, the examination of broad problems of world view, social history, and morality under the microscope of analysis by the techniques of linguistic logic, the reduction of problems of broad theory to the casuistics of hypothetical examples from everyday life, while concrete problems are reduced to questions about the questions themselves — all this is a firm tradition in British philosophical thought. Our knowledge of the state of ethical thought in Britain proved good, a fact attested to by our English colleagues. We were surprised by the persistence with which arguments and notions put forth by various individuals in earlier times, and familiar to us from the English literature, were resurrected again and again.

None of us had any illusions that the joint discussion of problems with representatives of a fundamentally different world view could promise quick agreement on central questions of ethics. We, of course, did not undertake to change the convictions of the English philosophers or to incline them to an acceptance of Marxism. Our intention was much more modest: to explain to our colleagues the content of the basic principles of Marxist ethics, to demonstrate the merits of our methodology and formulation of problems, and to draw our British opponents into a discussion in the course of which the Marxist philosophy of morality would present itself to them as worthy of attention, a meaningful alternative to the formalism and subjectivism of linguistic meta-ethics. To a certain degree, or so it appears to us, we succeeded in carrying out this undertaking. And we also learned a thing or two.

For all our negative attitude to formalism as such, we were

compelled to recognize that we had not always clearly distinguished between formalistics as a philosophical position ruling out examination of meaningful problems of ethics and formal analysis of the concepts of morality as a "technology" of theoretical reasoning. The methods of reasoning generally practiced in our ethics are in need of a very much higher level of exactness. We need to give attention to those very questions of form and logic, a disregard of which often results in vagueness in the position presented and in the confusing of problems of diverse levels with each other. And there was another lesson. It is one thing to critically analyze non-Marxist theories and set forth Marxist teachings before a Soviet audience and quite another to conduct a debate directly with spokesmen for a different world view. Things that are obvious to us seem to them quite debatable. Our fundamental principles are, to them, hypotheses requiring verification. But a debate is a debate, and no one can impose his points of departure upon another. Naturally, a direct dialogue is more difficult than a critical monologue aimed at an absent opponent, who often does not even know that he is being subjected to criticism. But therein lies the advantage of a bilateral exchange of opinions: each party to the debate is forced to use arguments that do not lose their essence of meaning when translated into the language of another philosophy.

Such an exchange of opinions is the more useful because very little is known about Marxist philosophy in England, and even less of Marxist ethics — and then most often from dubious sources. When some British author puts forth a new conception against already existing theories or undertakes a review of the schools of ethics existing in the West, he regards himself as justified in bypassing Marxism in silence. But there is another side to the problem. Those few Soviet writings on philosophy that have been translated into English do not always present our theory in a good light. If we turn to the works on ethics published in our country, one finds it difficult to choose anything to translate; as a rule, they simply do not take into consideration the subject areas and discussions

that have developed in the West during the 20th century — not to speak of the fact that the level of theory of these works leaves something to be desired. It is felt that the journal Voprosy filosofii satisfactorily represents our current thinking in philosophy. But in order for it to reach a broad readership in the West, it should at least be translated into English, which a majority of the philosophers in the West can read.

What did our discussions in England deal with? The problems debated were many. I shall list the most important: the choice and validation of a moral stance in the world of today, moral responsibility and the individual conscience, the relationship between ethics and morals, and the moral upbringing of man. The principal topic of discussion, and a subject for endless debate, was the question of the possibility of objective justification of moral values, ideals, and principles. And this is no accident. For a number of general reasons in the history of society, this question has become one of the central problems in the present-day theory of morality both in Soviet ethics and British meta-ethics. It includes a whole set of fundamental problems. Is it possible for the goals people set, the ideals and values they choose, to be validated by means of objective knowledge of man and his social world? Is it possible, by basing oneself upon the evidence of historical experience and scientific data, to prove the validity of certain moral principles and the untenability of others? If two opposite moral positions in the world of today express the interests and strivings of different social groups and societies (which is not challenged at all by English philosophers), is it possible to evaluate both with the aid of a single set of criteria, to demonstrate that one position is historically justified, and that the other position is in contradiction to the requirements of true humanity?

On the whole, the view taken by our opponents, despite variations in their individual convictions, may be described as being subjectivist and skeptical with respect to all these questions. (It is pertinent to note that these adjectives were first employed in the discussion not by us but by them themselves.)

In their opinion, moral judgments, statements of duty and value, cannot be validated by facts of a social nature, by scientific analysis thereof, or by recognition of laws of historical development. The opposite assumption (i.e., our Marxist position) leads, in their view, to the following difficulties: derivation of ideals from objective laws of history would deprive human beings of freedom of choice. They hold that while circumstances of society and history may explain the origin of various ideals and the reasons for their popularity among particular social groups, this explanation is not a justification (a validation as value) of these ideals. Further, in order to prove that general laws of society and history are the basis and the standard for justification of given values, it is necessary to prove that these laws themselves contain something of value. In other words, if history represents a certain progress, in order to identify this as an increasing value of social existence, it is necessary to have a criterion for evaluation, which must logically precede analysis of history. From this, the conclusion was drawn that value premises must underlie any theory of society and history which lays claim to offering a scientific basis for moral ideals.

Excursions into history, the evidence of experience common to all humanity, and references to the reality of social development, showing how moral ideals arise out of objective social necessity and the naturally developing needs of human society and of the individual, seemed to have little persuasive power upon our opponents. And is there a logical connection here? And how do we know that that which is determined by history has a positive significance as a value? We sought to show that it makes no sense to seek extrahistorical criteria of valuation, inasmuch as all questions pertaining to values arise only within the confines of the historical development of humankind and conceal real social problems underlying them. To recognize the historical necessity of a given social reality does not mean that one is an apologist for it. Freedom of moral choice, and criticism of what is, find justification from the standpoint of morality in the fact that all social reality is contradictory.

Some things which are now facts are beginning to be historically obsolete, and tendencies exist that open the possibility of historical creativity. But to this they objected: Does this sound convincing to the "common man"? Will he base his choice on appeals to historical necessity?

We sought to explain to our colleagues that it is necessary to distinguish among levels of judgment. The commonplace mode of argument of the individual is one thing, while the theoretical derivation and validation of a moral position that may be acknowledged to be just is another. The characteristics of the former are the subject area of psychology, while the logic of the latter is the concern of ethics. This is precisely the distinction between an explanation of a factual nature and the theoretical justification which our opponents are looking for. In the former instance, the influence of conditions of upbringing, habit, inclinations, and environment may be the deciding influence. On this plane, the individual does not yet reveal his freedom of choice. In the second case, to the degree that the individual becomes capable of rationally validating his convictions and of choosing them, despite the pressure of the facts of daily life and environment, of proclaiming his adherence to the progressive cause of humankind, he sometimes displays his freedom as a moral personality.

But again, considerations were advanced which tended to erode the basis and grounds for substantive discussion. And what if someone does not wish to recognize the interests of humankind and consistently adheres to the principle of selfishness and misanthropy? What moral arguments can persuade such an individual to change his ways? We replied that such an individual simply places himself beyond the pale of morality. All morality is the product of society. It performs functions which make a human community possible, i.e., it excludes on principle a position of absolutized egotism, despite all the differences among the moral systems known to history. In morality there exist certain "postulates" that are universal in the highest degree (the principles of sympathy and mutual help, service to human beings, limitations upon unalloyed



selfishness, and so forth) and that have condensed in themselves the millennia of experience of the history of society. To take a moral stand means to accept these "postulates." Cases are possible, of course, in which someone denies the obligatory nature of such principles; however, this is no longer the logic of the "special morality" of an individual but merely a denial of any moral law as such.

Our discussions of the problem of conscience come to mind. Does the standpoint of personal conscience have specific grounds in objective reality? The subjectivist answer to the question was formulated as follows. There is no difference in principle between the assertions, "I am convinced that I must act in such and such a manner" and "I am convinced that my conviction of the rightness of the course I have chosen is true." Conscience, we replied, is not mere conviction of one's rightness. On the contrary, it assumes above all else a critical attitude to one's deeds and convictions. Of course, any conviction may prove mistaken. Within the limits of psychological certainty about one's choice there are no guarantees and criteria making objective justification possible. But from our point of view, conscience has to be understood as something else — the capacity of the individual to go beyond his limits as a private person and to express in his subjective behavior the position of humankind, a genuine morality.

But who will judge this, we were asked: others, society? That would mean that the moral problem is decided not by conscience but by public opinion. We were compelled to return to our starting point. If conscience is a particular kind of moral capacity on the part of the individual, then moral consciousness itself must contain some means for solution of the problem by the individual. Such means could be a certain logic in reasoning, the conceptual apparatus, and criteria for verification. And these logical means can be developed only in the process of the historical development of morality, which takes into itself the practical experience of humankind. Consequently, the question as to the objective foundations of conscience must be examined more concretely on the plane of analysis of the logic

of moral consciousness. Therefore, the discussion has to be on a more tangible basis, and more detailed.

But when it seemed to us that the mutual argumentation was finally leading to some least common denominator on the basis of which a more concrete discussion of problems would be possible, the argument would be advanced that the history of humanity is by no means an a priori fact, so that one must not cite it in theoretical discussions. I remember that the same kind of arguments were also advanced during our meetings at the universities. What would happen if the genetic code of human heredity were to be fundamentally changed as the consequence of a cosmic catastrophe? What would then happen to the laws of history? I admit that it is difficult to argue with this hypothetical cosmic catastrophe, and, it seemed to us, senseless.

Of course, our discussion did not always wind up in a blind alley. We did come to agreement about a few things. Certain common positions were reached with respect to certain questions of moral upbringing. Strictly speaking, and specifically, the moral upbringing of the individual must, for example, teach a person to judge everything occurring in the world independently, on the basis of his own experience and that perceived in society. He should freely choose his personal position and follow it consistently, despite factors of accident in the environment, psychological pressure from without, and the compulsion of naked force. (May I note that all this was hard to harmonize with the subjectivist interpretation of conscience.)

Our English colleagues stated that an interest in Marxist ethics had been aroused in them, and also that they had gained an awareness of certain of its merits as theory. One British participant in the discussion declared that Marxist philosophy contrasts favorably to the dominant tradition in Britain by its concern for broad sociohistorical problems. We got the impression that the discussion, for all its incompleteness, left a definite trace in the consciousness of our British colleagues and at the very least produced in them some cloudy doubt as to whether the theory they adhere to is the only rational one.

Finally, a certain mutual understanding was attained, without which a fruitful exchange of opinions and a genuine struggle between convictions is not possible.

All this is evidence that our journey was not without value. Contacts of this type should be developed in the future. Our encounter had, one might say, a trial, an experimental, character. The experience demonstrated that bilateral seminars with limited numbers of participants devoted to one or several mutually related problems enjoy advantages over broad multilateral forums. (Three of us are in a position to make a comparison, on the basis of our personal experience, between this discussion and the 14th International Congress of Philosophy, which had ended only two weeks earlier.) This year, four British philosophers who are concerned with problems of morality will come to the Soviet Union. We expect further fruitful results from this meeting. At this point, we participants in this trip would like to express our deep gratitude to the Alliance of Friendship Societies and, within it, to the USSR-Great Britain Society, to the Society of Friends in England, and also personally to V. S. Nesterov, W. Barton, and A. Davis for all that they did to make our journey to England possible and fruitful.

#### Note

1) It included A. F. Shishkin, Iu. K. Mel'vil', L. N. Mitrokhin, and O. G. Drobnitskii. The delegation was headed by V. S. Nesterov, head of the Soviet "USSR-Great Britain" Society.