MARXISM
AND THE
IRRATIONALISTS

by

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CHAPTER I

IDEALISM AND MATERIALISM, WHAT ARE THEY?

The Conflict in Philosophy

"ALL philosophical doctrines in general have always been created under the powerful influence of the social situation to which they belonged,"[1] and every philosopher has always been a representative of some definite social trend. But such doctrines do not merely reflect social existence, they play a definite role in history. They may "serve the interests of the moribund forces of society . . . hamper the development, the progress of society," or they may "facilitate the overthrow of those forces which hamper the development of the material life of society." That is why the philosophical ideas current in any age should not be regarded as merely the speculation of academic persons; they play their part in moulding our type of civilisation. As we think we live.

In periods of social advance and the increasing mastery of natural forces, philosophy will tend to be optimistic and to place trust in reason. Very different will be those philosophies which reflect periods of slow social decay. Philosophy is definitely related "to the passions which stir the country at a given time" and "even every transient state of feeling."[2] That is why in such periods pessimism and irrationalism pervade philosophy or there is a turning away from the incomprehensibilities and tragedies of life to some transcendental world of absolute goodness and pre-existent perfection. Men in their disillusionment with human effort invoke the cosmic to rectify the evils of society and project the good they cannot achieve into the eternal.

Such are the dominant philosophies of the Western world today. But it is a too frequent error to pay attention to those philosophies which are current in the universities, the pulpits

[1] Chernyshevsky, *Selected Philosophical Essays.*
[2] *Ibid.*

and other accepted channels of thought and to overlook the constructive and advancing forms of thought, the harbingers of the age that is coming into being. It is true that " the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of the ruling class ", but there are other ideas arising among those who are in revolt against conditions, who represent the rival groups and classes which social development has called into being. Their philosophy will be in violent opposition to the ideas of the ruling class. As Marx said, " Before the proletariat fights out its battles on the barricades, it announces the coming of its rule with a series of intellectual victories." We have therefore the task of exposing and controverting those anti-social philosophies which are the allies of the existing order and whose role in history today is wholly negative and obstructive.

Such philosophies will be found to take the form of idealism. " Idealism ", says Professor Susan Stebbing, " is popularly understood to be the view that mind alone is real and that material bodies are in some sense or other to be regarded as states of, or elements in, consciousness—either the consciousness of human beings or of God."[1] But the term can be extended to all philosophies which regard ideas, principles, ideals, laws as having an independent existence of their own, so that the material world, historical events and human conduct in some way derive from them. Another form of idealism is the dualism which sets a pure world of mind over against a dead, mindless world of matter, the latter as much an abstraction as the former ; or the vitalism which postulates a life force as the agent of evolution and the source of all living and directive processes. Still another form of idealism is the philosophy that finds the ultimate reality on the one hand in sensations or observational data, or on the other hand in such concepts as " whiteness ", " squareness ", " duty ", " honesty " and so on, regarding all these " objects of thinking " as having a kind of existence of their own (or as the philosophers themselves would say, a *subsistence* of

[1] Stebbing, *Philosophy and the Physicists.*

their own). Many such philosophers would also regard the truths or propositions of logic and mathematics as constituting a special kind of reality discovered and apprehended by the mind of man. Such forms of idealism are somewhat akin to the philosophy of Plato, who believed that there existed a supra-physical world of realities which he called " Ideas ", eternal and unchangeable, the objects with which the definitions and universal truths of science are concerned. These for him were not " states " of the knowing mind, but objects distinct from and independent of the mind, about which it has knowledge. But later philosophers taught that objects of thought have no subsistence outside the thinking mind, and something rather like this is believed by many modern idealists.

Marxist Materialism

Perhaps the best way of understanding idealism is to contrast it with materialism in its Marxist form. Marxist materialism totally rejects the existence of a supernatural, supersensible world standing over against this one, whether it consists on the one hand of ideas or concepts or principles existing in their own right, or on the other of disembodied spiritual beings which influence events in the physical world. It rejects too the derivation of the world, or of any phenomenon in the world, from some spiritual source which preceded it. There is thus only one world, the world in space and time that we know, a rich and varied world, an evolving changing world, in which thinking, feeling and loving have come to be the great realities, in which " the spiritual life of society "[1] is as real as the conditions of its material life. Dialectical materialism also holds that this world, and the life within it, including man and society, is fully penetrable by reason. It may be known with an ever greater degree of truth, both in its structure and laws, both in its behaviour and its processes of change.

We could sum this view up by saying that the underlying

[1] Stalin, *Dialectical and Historical Materialism.*

and continuing foundation of the universe is not mind or consciousness, but matter in its multiple and changing modes. The truth of this position, as we shall see, is not dependent upon the definition of matter in terms of any particular stuff, since science may continue to refine and alter its views of the ultimate constituents of matter. What is important is the belief that the external world, call it matter, substance, electricity or what you will, exists antecedently to and independently of the human mind, a Divine Mind, or any other conceivable mind.

The Suicide of Thought

It might be supposed that idealism would tend to be an optimistic faith, and from time to time it has been. But reflecting as it does, in its theory of the contrast between physical appearances and spiritual realities, the dualism of a divided society, it also reflects the sickness of that society. And thus do we find idealism in the doldrums.

Today there are people so mentally and emotionally overwhelmed, so distraught by the hydrogen bomb, by the fear of communism, by the uncertainties of existence, so bewildered and scared by radio propaganda and the Press, that " to them the present is intolerable and the future unthinkable. They have the courage neither to live nor to die. They see themselves driven to the edge of a yawning abyss. They can neither advance nor retreat. And so they naturally seek solace in mysticism, in an inward life that persuades itself of the unreality of the real. It is their emotional escape from the present, and they gladly seek refuge in the timeless."[1]

It might be useful to put on record a few of the many cries of despair now rising from our idealist philosophers. A writer for the Student Christian Movement, one of the most influential ideological forces in our universities, declares that ours is " the rootless age. In our unawareness of foundations, unity and wholeness we are far worse than our remotest

[1] Prof. H. Levy in *The Communist Answer to the Challenge of Our Time.*

ancestors." And he launches into a fervent apologetic for the supernatural as the only way out.

Another speaking at a conference of university teachers admits among undergraduates, " a collapse of ultimate principles and ideals, an increasing area of subjective disruption, cynicism and lack of faith ",[1] and advocates a return to philosophy and instruction in philosophy in all universities as the way to a recovery of faith.

An American book, *Ideas Have Consequences*, by Richard Weaver, was reviewed at length recently in the B.B.C. Third Programme. Its theme is that our modern decadence is the fruit of a shallow empiricism—that is to say, of a philosophy which abandons the search for principles and lives by mere opinion, banishing the reality which is grasped by the intellect and accepting as reality only that which is perceived by the senses. " Most portentous of all, there appear diverging bases of value, so that our single planetary globe is mocked by worlds of different understanding." The remedy is to recover what he calls " the metaphysical dream ", by which he means a fixed framework of reference, a fundamental world view, to give coherence and meaning to life. This requires a realm of absolute, eternal realities, of fixed values, of goals towards which we can direct our efforts.

The argument is always the same. The mysteries and tragedies of a society which has had its day demand, for the idealist, not a realistic analysis of the moment of transition and a recognition that it is not the world that is in collapse, but capitalism, not man who is defeated and helpless but the social class which rules society today, but an escape into the supernatural and the transcendental, a pathetic cry for miraculous deliverance.

Another characteristic of the philosophical thought of our times is a profound disbelief in reason. How this could arise from the very nature of idealism is not at first clear. But the vice of idealism has always been to mistake the operations

[1] Synthesis in Education (*The Institute of Sociology*).

of the mind for a vision of reality ; to pass from the nature of thought to the nature of being. " The order and connection of ideas is the order and connection of things ", a rational scheme of things in the mind does not only *represent* reality, it *is* reality. The idealist is constantly postulating as already there, as already achieved, as, indeed, the ultimate reality behind the confusion of actual experience, the order and perfection and rationality of which men dream and which they seek behind the veil of illusion. But this turning away from the real environment to the mind of man who thinks about the environment started a movement that was bound to end in scepticism. For suddenly we see that we are contemplating only our own thinking. Our rationality is but the formal, empty outlines of a logical system, *not the natural world.* Our perceived world is not an objective, rational order, but only the world as forced into the framework of our systematising intellects. We can therefore never be sure whether the seeming rationality of the external world, if there is one, belongs to it or to some logical system we force upon it. So the idealism which tried to be objective is turned back on itself to sheer scepticism and subjectivity.

It is doubtful whether this has been a purely intellectual or theoretical development. In the early days of idealism it was the optimism of the nineteenth century that persuaded people that the world was as rational as they hoped it was. That is no longer possible for those who cannot see beyond the present order of society and a fatal contradiction emerges between the rational ideal of thought and the irrationality of the actual world.

And so faith in reason as a means of understanding reality and showing us how to control it and alter it peters out, and idealism itself ends in a violent attack upon the very possibility of knowing anything about nature or man, upon any philosophy which seeks to discover man's destiny and duty, even upon the very instrument of reason, which is declared to distort reality rather than reveal it.

But an attack upon systematic thought is treason to civilisa-

tion and throws away the chief safeguard against superstition. " Faith in reason is the trust that the ultimate natures of things lie together in a harmony which excludes mere arbitrariness. It is the faith that at the base of things we shall not find mere arbitrary mystery."[1]

Idealism and the External World

Let us now look at some of the more important idealistic tendencies in contemporary thought.

The most basic of these is still the much discussed view that what we perceive are always ideas and that we can never prove that there is a material world behind them. This was Bishop Berkeley's famous argument against eighteenth-century materialism. It has been said of this theory that it is equally impossible either to refute it or to accept it. This is not the case, and it has been refuted often enough. The truth is, however, that it is one of the most specious of philosophical arguments, and it is easier to be taken in by it than to see through it. In fact once one is tricked (that is the only possible term) into entertaining it, escape is not possible without a vigorous intellectual effort.

For this reason it is of little use merely to laugh it off or to attempt to refute it as Dr. Johnson did by kicking a large stone very vehemently. If the argument remains unrefuted, then the minds of many thoughtful people, even if they do not believe it, will have been subtly prepared for other, more credible but not less erroneous, idealistic conceptions.

Let us see how certain scientists and philosophers either draw very close to or even identify themselves with the Berkeleyan idealist position. Sir James Jeans says, " Our minds can only be acquainted with things inside themselves—never with things outside. . . . The Nature we study does not consist so much of something we perceive as of our perception."[2]

[1] Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World.*
[2] Jeans, *Presidential Address to the British Association,* 1934.

More than one scientist today falls into the same trap of declaring that we do not know physical objects but only states of consciousness. Bertrand Russell says : " Everything that we can directly observe of the physical world happens inside our heads and consists of mental events. The development of this point of view will lead us to the conclusion that the distinction between mind and matter is illusory." Russell thus dissolves the world into " mental events in the narrowest and strictest sense—any inference beyond percepts is incapable of being empirically tested." The mental, in perception, is thus held to be identical with the self-existent physical object. Sensations or percepts in a certain region of the brain are the ultimate facts.[1]

Professor Herbert Dingle, in his book *The Scientific Adventure*, is equally forthright in his confession of idealism. " What we know immediately is experience ; the world of material objects is what we (rightly or wrongly) infer from it."[2] The fallacy in such an inference, he says, is that first we say there must be a world of matter because we have experiences, and then we say that we have experiences because there is a world of matter which causes them.

We may digress to point out that if we were foolish enough to argue in this way we should indeed play right into the hands of idealism. But to say that there must be a world of matter because we have experiences, is to beg the question at the outset. That is what the idealist wants us to say, but of course we don't say it. We do not know experiences, we know physical objects, " knowledge unconditionally presupposes that the reality known exists independently of the knowledge of it, and that we know it as it exists in this independence," as Professor Prichard says.[3]

Dingle, who is professor of the history of science in University College, London, swings over completely to the position first

[1] Russell, *Our Knowledge of the External World.*
[2] Dingle, *The Scientific Adventure.*
[3] Prichard, *Kant's Theory of Knowledge.*

clearly expounded by Mach.[1] Science, he argues, aims " to organise the whole of *experience* into a rationally connected system, but unlike all previous philosophies, *it does not accept the world of material objects, but goes back to the original experiences* that led to the conception of that world for practical ends, and groups them differently."[2]

The pure philosopher does not really say anything very different when he says that the objects of philosophy belong wholly to the world of ideas. The minds of philosophers are normally directed upon the objects of a non-physical world and cannot easily bring attention to bear upon the contents of the physical one. The idealist scientist dwells on experiences in the mind, the transcendentalist philosopher on abstractions in the mind, and both reject knowledge of the material world.

[1] For an excellent summary of Mach's views and a critical treatment of them, see Cornforth, *Science versus Idealism.*

[2] Dingle, *loc. cit.* (our italics).

CHAPTER II

WHY BERKELEY WAS WRONG

Berkeley's Argument

BEFORE going any further it will be necessary to clear up the whole muddle about the theory that each mind perceives nothing but its own mental states. The idealist, or perhaps we should say the subjective idealist, who in the last resort discovers the objects of our knowledge to be ideas or sensations in our minds, argues something like this : When a hard, square, red object, such as a brick, is perceived, we are perceiving a collection of qualities, and we usually believe that the object, the brick in this case, is that which *has* these qualities. But all such qualities are only known to us as mental experiences of colour and the like. The red patch is really, for our minds, a sense experience, not a brick. If we smell a rose, we really smell an odour and that too is a sense experience. Even hardness and shape are tactile experiences. Let us call what we actually experience sense-data. It is clear that what we normally do is to interpret the sense-data as qualities of concrete objects and we say that we *perceive* the brick by *sensing its qualities*. The quality, we believe, requires a substance in which to inhere.

But does it ? The whole notion of substance is a myth, says the idealist. The *thing* is nothing more than the sum of its *experienced qualities*. There can be no possible proof of anything else. But since all qualities reside only in percipient minds, the object itself must do the same. In brief, the object is of the nature of an idea.

If that is so, the *idea* of a brick is not different from the idea of beauty, or squareness, or God. They are all mentally real, but not real in any other way. Nor is a brick more real than squareness, or squareness less real than a brick.

But the plain man at once points out a significant difference.

Not all ideas have the same status. Some are vividly and persistently held in our minds, *as if* these qualities inhered in some object before us, others are less objective, they are merely our ideas. The idealist grants this at once. He does not deny the existence of *objects which insist on being known* and which are persistently there. All that he is out to deny is that an experience of this kind requires a *material* universe. The experience, he argues, is not necessarily an experience of knowing *a material world.* It is only a peculiar kind of experience. It is still something mental. The real problem is what can be the *origin* of such an experience, if not a material object? But since, even if matter existed, the idealist finds it hard to imagine how it would get across to something so different from itself as mind, why should not *something mental* be the cause of our experiences of collections of qualities?

Idealists differ considerably as to what mental or "ideal" origin there might be for our perceptions. Bishop Berkeley, one of the ablest and the first of the modern idealists, held that the objects we perceive, not being of our own making, have a cause of their own, but that cause is not matter, but God. The only realities, then, are God, other spirits created by Him, and the various ideas or experiences which He has ordained to be apprehended in certain regular sequences. Idealism, however, need not believe in God and may instead simply rest in the ideal or mental character of all reality.

It will be seen that the upshot of the discussion is to disprove the existence of a material world and to suggest that the whole experienced universe is of the same nature as the mind. If that is the case, materialism is refuted and the principal objection to a religious explanation of the universe is removed. And that is precisely what the founder of modern idealism, Bishop Berkeley, intended. And very often it is precisely what our modern idealists have in mind as well.

Now what is the reply? To strike a great stone with the foot and say "I refute it thus" is only to show that the theory has never even been understood.

The Refutation of Berkeley

We must do better than that. Yet refutation is simpler than might be supposed. When the idealist says that it is only our own mental states that we know, or that we certainly know them better than we know anything else, he is labouring under a misconception. Certainly to know a thing is to have an idea of it, but that does not mean that you only know the idea. Because you cannot be conscious of the material world without thinking about it, it does not follow that all you are conscious of is your thinking ! The fact that a known thing must, *as an element of knowledge*, be classed as an idea only means that when a thing is known it occupies a new relationship—the relationship of being known. But in thus assuming the status of an *idea*, as well as a material object, it does not by any means become identified with that idea. The object does not become an idea and nothing but an idea. Therefore whatever is known is not, just because it is thought about, itself of the nature of mind. The idealist confuses the thing apprehended with the act of apprehension. The thought of a thing must be in the mind, but the thing of which we are aware is not in the mind, and is therefore not mental. We thus vindicate a common-sense attitude to reality.

So far from mental experience shutting us up in pure subjectivism, mind is essentially that which possesses the characteristic of becoming acquainted with things other than itself. The idealists treat knowing in a way which flatly traverses our experience. As Whitehead says, " This experience knows away from and beyond our own personality—it is not a knowledge about our own personality."[1] Moreover it is not a passive perception of an un-get-at-able world, as if the observer were located in one of those glass observation chambers sunk in the sea. Knowledge is for action and results in action, and action means passing beyond the self into the world. That is why Marx said that " The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated

[1] Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World.*

from practice is a purely scholastic question."[1] It is the success of our actions, argues Engels, that proves the correspondence of our perception with the objective nature of the objects perceived. " Practice ought to be the first and fundamental criterion of the theory of knowledge."

There *are* purely mental experiences, but they are quickly shown to be such by not standing up to the test of action. We then, rightly, call them illusions. If, on the other hand, any experience allows us to act upon it, *corrects* what was purely mental (i.e. illusory) by some sharp reaction or verifies the correctness of our perception by standing up to our activity, then we have no reason whatever to doubt its objectivity and materiality. E.g., a mirage does not allow us to slake our thirst, it vanishes as we approach. Real water is drinkable, can be splashed, objects float on it, it is wet, and so on. " Our knowledge of nature is an experience of activity." " If we are able to prove the correctness of our conception of a natural process by making it ourselves, bringing it into being out of its conditions and using it for our own purposes into the bargain, then there is an end of the Kantian incomprehensible ' thing-in-itself '. The chemical substances produced in the bodies of plants and animals remained just such ' things-in-themselves ' until organic chemistry began to produce them one after another, whereupon the ' thing-in-itself ' became a thing for us."[2]

In other words, there is a continual interaction between knower and known on the basis of his knowledge. What he knows enables him to act successfully. If his knowledge is not of the object as it is, is not correct, his action is unsuccessful and the result may be disastrous. Moreover, successful action changes the external situation and brings new facts before us, which we have to observe carefully and learn to know. This new knowledge immediately requires a new kind of action and so the process goes on.

Thus experience bears out the fact that we are very far

[1] Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach.*
[2] Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach.*

from being locked up in the world of our own ideas. On the contrary, we are always finding out things about the world outside us and adjusting ourselves by action to its requirements. Objectivity is of the essence of the experience.

The Consequences of Idealism

Bishop Berkeley thought that he had disproved materialism and proved idealism, and so do his twentieth-century disciples. As a matter of fact their arguments are the *reductio ad absurdum* of idealism and serve the useful purpose of showing us very clearly what follows from the *presupposition* of idealism. When we see that what follows is incredible we are forced to the conclusion that it is the *presupposition* that is indefensible.

If the consequences of a theory are manifestly contrary to fact, we must change the theory. If I think that a particular switch controls a particular light but when I turn it off the light continues to burn, then I know I was wrong about the switch, my supposition was incorrect.

Now the theory underlying idealism is that what we know are sensations, experiences, ideas, representations of objects, but not physical objects themselves. What follows from this?

1. No material things exist in the universe, but only minds.

2. Each of us is shut up in his own mind with his own mental picture. There is no common public world existing independently.

3. The world could not have existed before man appeared upon it. Where was it and what was it before it existed in minds? Are the geologists and astronomers completely wrong when they describe its existence for some 3,000,000,000 years before man and his thoughts existed?

4. Did my father exist before I came to know him? Presumably not, if to exist is to be perceived. Then I never had a father.

5. Did the rocket bomb go off in your head or in the street two hundred yards from your home?

6. Look at a fish in an aquarium. Does the fish only know its sensations or is it aware of the tank and the objects in the

tank which it pursues or avoids? *Is* there a tank? *Are* there objects? And if the fish sees you, do you exist only when and for as long as the fish sees you? You *know* that there is a real world, a material environment for the fish, and that it senses it and reacts to it. Is there any less reason for accepting the physical environment around men?

What do we conclude? There must be something wrong with the theory that the real world cannot be known directly and that we only know mental representations existing in our minds. In other words, Berkeley has shown that "if anybody attempts to explain how material things exist and how we know them, by holding that we know mental representations of them, then he is next compelled to hold that there exist no such things at all, but only minds with sensations or ideas in them. He is compelled to hold that there exists no common public world of real things, and that mountains and railway engines are no more independently real entities than are toothaches. This is a conclusion we cannot accept, so that the original theory from which that conclusion is deduced must itself be abandoned."[1] That original theory is the presupposition, often taken for granted as unquestionable and obvious, that we know *things* only by knowing sensations which are purely mental, and then *inferring* the existence of things. It is precisely that assumption which is wrong. But if it is wrong because its consequences are contrary to fact, what other assumption can we make? Surely that somehow or other we know the real world directly and not at second-hand. What we know is the real world and our knowledge of the world around us is not a vast illusion.

Knowledge not Passive

Behind the idealist approach is a curiously academic and contemplative attitude of mind, the existence of which we do not always realise (particularly if we are a bit academic and contemplative ourselves). Man is thought of as a mind examining its own mental processes and not an organism

[1] Sinclair, *Introduction to Philosophy*.