

A New Basis for Ethics

(By Oakley Calvin Johnson, in the June "Proletarian.")

THE psychological importance of moral ideas can scarcely be over-estimated—if at all. It is amazing to observe the tenacity with which humanity clings to what is considered right; but it is even more amazing to note the celerity with which humanity, after discarding a worn-out ethical principle, declares that the new one was right all the time but hadn't been discovered. And all the time mankind is perfectly sincere in thus standing for the Right and the Good.

It is these moral ideas that thwart and puzzle the minds of reformers in all times and circumstances. Some Pankhurst advocates equal suffrage, and is pained to find woman after woman declare against her own political "emancipation" because "woman's duty is to the home!"

No clear understanding of the nature of the moral ideas pervading society is possible unless based on a scientific analysis of the origin of these ideas. This implies, of course, that the supposed causes be carefully examined, and either accepted or rejected. According to the older theologians it was God himself who told man the difference between right and wrong, and handed down from some Mt. Sinai the commandments which minutely differentiated Evil from Good in human conduct. But it was early apparent that there were many gods, and that these gods did not agree in such matters. Baal and Jehovah, for example, were both discredited. One after another the divine rules became obsolete; Moses' "eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth" was ruled out by Christ who declared for "humility and turning the other cheek," and now our Newell Dwight Hillis's have shelved Christ's dictum in favor of "moral regeneration through war," and "hating the Hun."

The idea of divine fiat in the moral realm, not being supported by facts, was laid aside by the philosophers, and Human Reason appointed in its stead. It is plain, asserted the philosophers, that the laws of right and wrong are absolute, and if we apply our reason we can find out what is eternally good and what is eternally bad, then do the one and abstain from the other.

The moral philosophers of today are very sure of some, at least, of the absolute principles upon which morality is supposedly based. One principle is that it is wrong to take life; but we take the life of mosquitoes when they annoy us and of trees when we want a house. The "eternal" principle is then modified to mean, that it is wrong to take the life of animals that can feel pain; but tigers can feel pain. Then the rule is confined to humankind only; but we hang murderers and shoot our enemies. In desperation our philosophers finally apply the law to young children, for it is an "absolute" moral principle that the killing of young children is bad; but a Chicago doctor lets a hopelessly deformed baby die. Oh, well, persists the moral philosopher, of course there are exceptions. But we insist that an absolute principle in Ethics or anything else permits of no conditions.

Now the true basis of moral ideas has been scientifically analyzed and exposed by the Socialist thinkers, Dietzgen, Engels, and Marx. Their researches gave rise to the principle that the economic interests of people have a very strong bearing on their conceptions of what is right or wrong. At the present time, for instance, it is considered immoral to use or spread the use of alcoholic liquors, a belief directly contrary to both the teachings and practice of two or three generations ago. But insurance companies discovered that heavy users of alcoholic beverages are not the best risks, and industrial enterprises were found to suffer through the neglect of drunken workers, and lo! it was deemed bad to drink. To be sure, the brewers and saloonkeepers, having a

living to make, were convinced that the booze business is a divine institution, but the fact that there were more people whose economic interests were injured than there were benefited by King Alcohol led to the moral condemnation of the traffic, and is rapidly leading to its overthrow; again, songbirds are now protected by law, and it is a virtue to build birdhouses for them and feed them, while a few years ago they were sadly neglected, and in many cases rewards were offered for killing them. But at that time the birds were accused of ruining the farmers' fruit and grain, whereas it is well known now that birds are perhaps the most effective destroyers of insect pests that we have. Thus does Economics dictate the "truths" of Ethics.

It is not claimed here that liquors used for beverages ought not to be abolished, or that songbirds ought not to be protected; the point is that moral ideas are very largely influenced by economic considerations, by the manner in which people make their living. To the southern slaveholder of 1860 chattel slavery was right, and to the northern factory owner of the same year it was right to take the lion's share of the product of his factory hands. Our capitalists teach the Boy Scouts the doctrine of "unquestioning obedience," because docile workers are highly advantageous in industry; but the disillusioned workers in these industries agitate to "fan the flames of discontent." Great Britain and the former German Government, to give another instance, solemnly justify themselves in their treatment, respectively, of Ireland and Belgium.

The economic factor in people's conduct, illustrated by these examples, has long been recognized. There are, however, two other factors that play a part in history, and these are styled by Enrico Ferri, the Telluric and the Hereditary factors, respectively. The first refers to the physical conditions of life on the planet—climate, geographical influences, and so on. Thus, industry must be a virtue in a cold climate, but is superfluous in tropical countries. The second, of course, takes into consideration the influences that come down to us from the past, and their inevitable tendency to modify to a greater or less extent the institutions, moral or otherwise, which are grounded on the economic structure of society. Thus, the inheritance of Puritans and Cavaliers modified their social institutions in colonial America. At any rate all these factors are material causes of moral ideas; material and external causes, not spiritual or supernatural or divine. Hence, the method of explaining history on these principles is styled the Materialist Conception of History, or, more simply, Historical Materialism.

Enough has surely been said to show that Socialism, which teaches the materialist basis of Ethics, is not "applied Christianity." Christianity is essentially metaphysical and idealistic, while Socialism is scientific and materialistic. But does this mean that Socialists propose the abolition of morality, of right and wrong? Are we no longer to have "high ideals?" This is not the case by any means. Socialists do not abolish morality, but they point out that it is relative, not absolute, and they show conclusively the varying material forces by which it is formed. Since the prevailing ethical conditions of the present time are shaped by the material conditions of capitalist society, the proletariat, therefore, should recognize the fact, and decline to be guided by moral scruples superimposed upon them by their masters. Proletarian economic welfare, not bourgeois interests, must be the basis of proletarian Ethics.

This proposition can be proved by a consideration of the process of animal and human evolution. We see that Nature has laid down the inexorable law that whatever is good for the species is right, whatever is bad for the species is wrong. The most ideal of all virtues, mother-love—a love so forgetful of self that the mother will die for her

W. LUNN'S STRONG FIGHTING SPEECH.

A Labor member in the British House of Commons, speaking of the huge expenditures on the Army, Navy and Air Services, he said:

I suppose, he said this is because the Government's Peace policy is at variance with their aims during the war. Or is it because we must have another war to destroy the Republics and the objects of revolutions in other countries. We have to raise this enormous revenue because the policy of the Government is not one of peace, but is absolutely militarist and imperialistic. By this Bill we are to raise taxation to find money to help dictators like Koltchak to defeat the Russian revolution.

The Work of the Coal Commission.

Continuing, Mr. Lunn supported a Capital Levy. A scathing description of the glaring class distinctions in the Budget with its veiled taxation of necessities like sugar and tea, side by side with the enormous gift of 40 per cent. reduction in the Excess Profits Tax to the richest and least deserving classes, led Mr. Lunn to the bold declaration:

Our hopes lie more at the other end of this building in the Royal Commission, which is exposing the hollowness of our industrial system, and which is exposing the rottenness of our landowning system, and which is laying the basis of future legislation. Robert Smillie and his colleagues have won the undying gratitude of the workers by what they are doing in that Commission.

"The Cup Is Full."

And, later, developing this line of thought, and foreshadowing the possibility of strong action by Labor politically in the near future, he declared:

I am a Constitutionalist when it suits me, like most members of this House, but I am sure, after the imposition of Conscription by this Government on the people, with the threat to use the military in trade disputes, and now a Budget like this, which is absolutely in the interests of the rich man, the cup is full, and I hope, if our position in this House is not sufficiently strong to break down the policy of the Government—and I speak as a loyal member of the Labor Party in these things—we will withdraw from the House and join hands with that organized industrial body in the country, to take whatever means are considered necessary to destroy the impositions and restrictions this Government is trying to force upon us.

child—is a direct result of the necessity for species-perpetuity. Species-welfare, then—not the Egoism of Anarchists nor the Altruism of Religionists—is the broad basis for a sane ethical philosophy; and species welfare, of course, means the sum of the material factors working for the interests of the race.

Now it happens that the human race is divided into classes whose interests are diametrically opposed to each other. No reconciliation of these classes is possible. We must side either with the Bourgeoisie or with the Proletariat. But no species can secure the highest welfare so long as it is divided into warring groups; and to side with the Bourgeoisie means the perpetuation of classes, since Capitalism can not exist without a class to exploit. On the other hand, to side with the Proletariat means the final abolition of classes and with the advent of a classless society comes the only possible basis for complete species welfare.

The highest morality, therefore, is uncompromising adherence to proletarian interests. Species-welfare becomes for us proletarian-welfare. We have "high ideals," to be sure—but we recognize that the Ideal must be based on the Real. Our principles, being true, are naturally shocking to the enemies of the Proletariat, but let them be comforted by the reflection that there are worse shocks awaiting them.