



## Morality and Law. Eternal Truths

**Frederick Engels**

**W**e refrain from giving samples of the mish-mash of platitudes and oracular sayings, in a word, of the simple balderdash with which Herr Dühring regales his readers for fifty full pages as the deep-rooted science of the elements of consciousness. We will cite only this: “He who can think only by means of language has never yet learnt what is meant by abstract and pure thought.”

On this basis animals are the most abstract and purest thinkers, because their thought is never obscured by the officious intrusion of language. In any case one can see from the Dühringian thoughts and the language in which they are couched how little suited these thoughts are to any language, and how little suited the German language is to these thoughts.

At last the fourth section brings us deliverance; apart from the liquefying pap of rhetoric, it does at least offer us, here and there, something tangible on the subject of morality and law. Right at the outset, on this occasion, we are invited to take a trip to the other celestial bodies: the elements of morals “must occur in concordant fashion among all extra-human beings whose active reason has to deal with the conscious ordering of life impulses in the form of instincts... And yet our interest in such deductions will be small...Nevertheless it is an idea which beneficently extends our range of vision, when we think that on other celestial bodies individual and communal life must be based on a scheme which ...is unable to abrogate or escape from the general fundamental constitution of a rationally acting being.”

In this case, by way of exception, the validity of the Dühringian truths also for all other possible worlds is put at the beginning instead of the end of the chapter concerned; and for a sufficient reason. If the validity of the Dühringian conceptions of morality and justice is first established for all worlds, it is all the more easy beneficently to extend their validity to all times. But once again what is involved is nothing less than final and ultimate truth.

The world of morals, “just as much as the world of general knowledge”, has “its permanent principles and simple elements”. The moral principles stand “above history and also above the present differences in national characteristics...The special truths out of which, in the course of evolution, a more complete moral consciousness and, so to speak, conscience are built up, may, in so far as their ultimate basis is understood, claim a validity and range similar to the insights and applications of mathematics, Genuine truths are absolutely immutable ... so that it is altogether stupid to think that the correctness of knowledge is something that can be affected by time and changes in reality.”. Hence the certitude of strict knowledge and the adequacy of common cognition leave no room, when we are in possession of our senses, for doubting the absolute validity of the principles of knowledge. “Even persistent doubt is itself a diseased condition of weakness and only the expression of hopeless confusion, which sometimes seeks to contrive the appearance of something stable in the systematic consciousness of its nothingness. In the sphere of ethics, the denial of general principles clutches at the geographical and historical variety of customs and principles, and once the inevitable necessity of moral wickedness and

evil is conceded, it believes itself so much the more to be above the recognition of the great importance and actual efficacy of concordant moral impulses. This mordant scepticism, which is not directed against particular false doctrines but against mankind's very capacity to develop conscious morality, resolves itself ultimately into a real Nothing, in fact into something that is worse than pure nihilism...It flatters itself that it can easily dominate within its utter chaos of disintegrated ethical ideas and open the gates to unprincipled arbitrariness. But it is greatly mistaken: for mere reference to the inevitable fate of reason in error and truth suffices to show by this analogy alone that natural fallibility does not necessarily exclude the attainment of accuracy."

Up to now we have calmly put up with all these pompous phrases of Herr Dühring's about final and ultimate truths, the sovereignty of thought, absolute certainty of knowledge, and so forth, because it is only at the point which we have now reached that the matter can be settled. Up to this point it has been enough to enquire how far the separate assertions of the philosophy of reality had "sovereign validity" and "an unconditional claim to truth;" now we come to the question whether any, and if so which, products of human knowledge ever can have sovereign validity and an unconditional claim to truth. When I say "of human knowledge" I do not use the phrase with the intention of insulting the inhabitants of other celestial bodies, whom I have not had the honour of knowing, but only for the reason that animals also have knowledge, though it is in no way sovereign. A dog acknowledges his master to be his God, though this master may be the biggest scoundrel on earth.

Is human thought sovereign? Before we can answer yes or no we must first enquire: what is human thought? Is it the thought of the individual man? No. But it exists only as the individual thought of many milliards of past, present and future men. If, then, I say that the total thought of all these human beings, including the future ones, which is embraced in my idea, is sovereign, able to know the world as it exists, if only mankind lasts long enough and in so far as no limits are imposed on its knowledge by its perceptive organs or the objects to be known, then I am saying something which is pretty banal and, in addition, pretty barren. For the most valuable result from it would be that it should make us extremely distrustful of our present knowledge, inasmuch as in all probability we are just about at the beginning of human history, and the generations which will put us right are likely to be far more numerous than those whose knowledge we — often enough with a considerable degree of contempt — have the opportunity to correct.

Herr Dühring himself proclaims it to be a necessity that consciousness, and therefore also thought and knowledge, can become manifest only in a series of individual beings. We can only ascribe sovereignty to the thought of each of these individuals in so far as we are not aware of any power which would be able to impose any idea forcibly on him, when he is of sound mind and wide awake. But as for the sovereign validity of the knowledge obtained by each individual thought, we all know that there can be no talk of such a thing, and that all previous experience shows that without exception such knowledge always contains much more that is capable of being improved upon than that which cannot be improved upon, or is correct.

In other words, the sovereignty of thought is realised in a series of extremely unsovereignly-thinking human beings; the knowledge which has an unconditional claim to truth is realised in a series of relative errors; neither the one nor the other can be fully realised except through an unending duration of human existence.

Here once again we find the same contradiction as we found above, between the character of human thought, necessarily conceived as absolute, and its reality in individual human beings all of whom think only limitedly. This is a contradiction which can be resolved only in the course of infinite progress, in what is — at least practically for us — an endless succession of generations of mankind. In this sense human thought is just as much sovereign as not sovereign, and its capacity for knowledge just as much unlimited as limited. It is sovereign and unlimited

in its disposition, its vocation, its possibilities and its historical ultimate goal; it is not sovereign and it is limited in its individual realisation and in reality at any particular moment.

It is just the same with eternal truths. If mankind ever reached the stage at which it should work only with eternal truths, with results of thought which possess sovereign validity and an unconditional claim to truth, it would then have reached the point where the infinity of the intellectual world both in its actuality and in its potentiality had been exhausted, and thus the famous miracle of the counted uncountable would have been performed.

But are there any truths which are so securely based that any doubt of them seems to us to be tantamount to insanity? That twice two makes four, that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, that Paris is in France, that a man who gets no food dies of hunger, and so forth? Are there then nevertheless eternal truths, final and ultimate truths?

Certainly there are. We can divide the whole realm of knowledge in the traditional way into three great departments. The first includes all sciences that deal with inanimate nature and are to a greater or lesser degree susceptible of mathematical treatment: mathematics, astronomy, mechanics, physics, chemistry. If it gives anyone any pleasure to use mighty words for very simple things, it can be asserted that certain results obtained by these sciences are eternal truths, final and ultimate truths; for which reason these sciences are known as the exact sciences. But very far from all their results have this validity. With the introduction of variable magnitudes and the extension of their variability to the infinitely small and infinitely large, mathematics, usually so strictly ethical, fell from grace; it ate of the tree of knowledge, which opened up to it a career of most colossal achievements, but at the same time a path of error. The virgin state of absolute validity and irrefutable proof of everything mathematical was gone forever; the realm of controversy was inaugurated, and we have reached the point where most people differentiate and integrate not because they understand what they are doing but from pure faith, because up to now it has always come out right. Things are even worse with astronomy and mechanics, and in physics and chemistry we are swamped by hypotheses as if attacked by a swarm of bees. And it must of necessity be so. In physics we are dealing with the motion of molecules, in chemistry with the formation of molecules out of atoms, and if the interference of light waves is not a myth, we have absolutely no prospect of ever seeing these interesting objects with our own eyes. As time goes on, final and ultimate truths become remarkably rare in this field.

We are even worse off in geology which, by its nature, has to deal chiefly with processes which took place not only in our absence but in the absence of any human being whatever. The gleaning here of final and ultimate truths is therefore a very troublesome business, and the crop is extremely scanty.

The second department of science is the one which covers the investigation of living organisms. In this field there is such a multiplicity of interrelationships and causalities that not only does the solution of each question give rise to a host of other questions, but each separate problem can in most cases only be solved piecemeal, through a series of investigations which often require centuries; and besides, the need for a systematic presentation of interconnections makes it necessary again and again to surround the final and ultimate truths with a luxuriant growth of hypotheses. What a long series of intermediaries from Galen to Malpighi was necessary for correctly establishing such a simple matter as the circulation of the blood in mammals, how slight is our knowledge of the origin of blood corpuscles, and how numerous are the missing links even today, for example, to be able to bring the symptoms of a disease into some rational relationship with its cause! And often enough discoveries, such as that of the cell, are made which compel us to revise completely all formerly established final and ultimate truths in the realm of biology, and to put whole piles of them on the scrap-heap once and for all. Anyone who wants to establish really genuine and immutable truths here will therefore have to be content with such platitudes as: all men are mortal, all female mammals have lacteal glands, and the like; he will not even be able to assert that the higher animals digest with their stomachs

and intestines and not with their heads, for the nervous activity, which is centralised in the head, is indispensable to digestion.

But eternal truths are in an even worse plight in the third, the historical, group of sciences, which study in their historical sequence and in their present resultant state the conditions of human life, social relationships, forms of law and government, with their ideal superstructure in the shape of philosophy, religion, art, etc. In organic nature we are at least dealing with a succession of processes which, so far as our immediate observation is concerned, recur with fair regularity within very wide limits. Organic species have on the whole remained unchanged since the time of Aristotle. In social history, however, the repetition of conditions is the exception and not the rule, once we pass beyond the primitive state of man, the so-called Stone Age; and when such repetitions occur, they never arise under exactly similar circumstances. Such, for example, is the existence of an original common ownership of the land among all civilised peoples, or the way it was dissolved. In the sphere of human history our knowledge is therefore even more backward than in the realm of biology. Furthermore, when by way of exception the inner connection between the social and political forms of existence in any epoch comes to be known, this as a rule occurs only when these forms have already by half outlived themselves and are nearing extinction. Therefore, knowledge is here essentially relative, inasmuch as it is limited to the investigation of interconnections and consequences of certain social and state forms which exist only in a particular epoch and among particular peoples and are by their very nature transitory. Anyone therefore who here sets out to hunt down final and ultimate truths, genuine, absolutely immutable truths, will bring home but little, apart from platitudes and commonplaces of the sorriest kind — for example, that, generally speaking, men cannot live except by labour; that up to the present they for the most part have been divided into rulers and ruled; that Napoleon died on May 5, 1821, and so on.

Now it is a remarkable thing that it is precisely in this sphere that we most frequently encounter truths which claim to be eternal, final and ultimate and all the rest of it. That twice two makes four, that birds have beaks, and similar statements, are proclaimed as eternal truths only by those who aim at deducing, from the existence of eternal truths in general, the conclusion that there are also eternal truths in the sphere of human history — eternal morality, eternal justice, and so on — which claim a validity and scope similar to those of the insights and applications of mathematics. And then we can confidently rely on this same friend of humanity taking the first opportunity to assure us that all previous fabricators of eternal truths have been to a greater or lesser extent asses and charlatans, that they all fell into error and made mistakes; but that their error and their fallibility are in accordance with nature's laws, and prove the existence of truth and accuracy precisely in his case; and that he, the prophet who has now arisen, has in his bag, all ready-made, final and ultimate truth, eternal morality and eternal justice. This has all happened so many hundreds and thousands of times that we can only feel astonished that there should still be people credulous enough to believe this, not of others, oh no! but of themselves. Nevertheless we have here before us at least one more such prophet, who also, quite in the accustomed way, flies into highly moral indignation when other people deny that any individual whatsoever is in a position to deliver the final and ultimate truth. Such a denial, or indeed mere doubt of it, is weakness, hopeless confusion, nothingness, mordant scepticism, worse than pure nihilism, utter chaos and other such pleasantries. As with all prophets, instead of critical and scientific examination and judgment one encounters moral condemnation out of hand.

We might have made mention above also of the sciences which investigate the laws of human thought, i.e., logic and dialectics. In these, however, eternal truths do not fare any better. Herr Dühring declares that dialectics proper is pure nonsense; and the many books which have been and are still being written on logic provide abundant proof that here, too, final and ultimate truths are much more sparsely sown than some people believe.

For that matter, there is absolutely no need to be alarmed at the fact that the stage of

knowledge which we have now reached is as little final as all that have preceded it. It already embraces a vast mass of judgments and requires very great specialisation of study on the part of anyone who wants to become conversant with any particular science. But a man who applies the measure of genuine, immutable, final and ultimate truth to knowledge which, by its very nature, must either remain relative for many generations and be completed only step by step, or which, as in cosmogony, geology and the history of mankind, must always contain gaps and be incomplete because of the inadequacy of the historical material — such a man only proves thereby his own ignorance and perversity, even if the real thing behind it all is not, as in this case, the claim to personal infallibility. Truth and error, like all thought-concepts which move in polar opposites, have absolute validity only in an extremely limited field, as we have just seen, and as even Herr Dühring would realise if he had any acquaintance with the first elements of dialectics, which deal precisely with the inadequacy of all polar opposites. As soon as we apply the antithesis between truth and error outside of that narrow field which has been referred to above it becomes relative and therefore unserviceable for exact scientific modes of expression, and if we attempt to apply it as absolutely valid outside that field we really find ourselves altogether beaten: both poles of the antithesis become transformed into their opposites, truth becomes error and error truth. Let us take as an example the well-known Boyle's law. According to it, if the temperature remains constant, the volume of a gas varies inversely with the pressure to which it is subjected. Regnault found that this law does not hold good in certain cases. Had he been a philosopher of reality he would have had to say: Boyle's law is mutable, and is hence not a genuine truth, hence it is not a truth at all, hence it is an error. But had he done this he would have committed an error far greater than the one that was contained in Boyle's law; his grain of truth would have been lost sight of in a sand-hill of error; he would have distorted his originally correct conclusion into an error compared with which Boyle's law, along with the little particle of error that clings to it would have seemed like truth. But Regnault, being a man of science, did not indulge in such childishness, but continued his investigations and discovered that in general Boyle's law is only approximately true, and in particular loses its validity in the case of gases which can be liquefied by pressure, namely, as soon as the pressure approaches the point at which liquefaction begins. Boyle's law therefore was proved to be true only within definite limits. But is it absolutely and finally true within those limits? No physicist would assert that. He would maintain that it holds good within certain limits of pressure and temperature and for certain gases; and even within these more restricted limits he would not exclude the possibility of a still narrower limitation or altered formulation as the result of future investigations. This is how things stand with final and ultimate truths in physics, for example. Really scientific works therefore, as a rule, avoid such dogmatically moral expressions as error and truth, while these expressions meet us everywhere in works such as the philosophy of reality, in which empty phrasemongering attempts to impose itself on us as the most sovereign result of sovereign thought.

But, a naive reader may ask, where has Herr Dühring expressly stated that the content of his philosophy of reality is final and even ultimate truth? Where? Well, for example, in the dithyramb on his system (page 13), a part of which we cited in Chapter II. Or when he says, in the passage quoted above: Moral truths, in so far as their ultimate bases are understood, claim the same validity as mathematical insights. And does not Herr Dühring assert that, working from his really critical standpoint and by means of those researches of his which go to the root of things, he has forced his way through to these ultimate foundations, the basic schemata, and has thus bestowed final and ultimate validity on moral truths? Or, if Herr Dühring does not advance this claim either for himself or for his age, if he only meant to say that perhaps some day in the dark and nebulous future final and ultimate truths may be ascertained, if therefore he meant to say much the same, only in a more confused way, as is said by "mordant scepticism" and "hopeless confusion" — then, in that case, what is all the noise about, what can

we do for you, Herr Dühring?

If, then, we have not made much progress with truth and error, we can make even less with good and evil. This opposition manifests itself exclusively in the domain of morals, that is, a domain belonging to the history of mankind, and it is precisely in this field that final and ultimate truths are most sparsely sown. The conceptions of good and evil have varied so much from nation to nation and from age to age that they have often been in direct contradiction to each other. — But all the same, someone may object, good is not evil and evil is not good, if good is confused with evil there is an end to all morality, and everyone can do as he pleases. — This is also, stripped of all oracular phrases, Herr Dühring's opinion. But the matter cannot be so simply disposed of. If it were such an easy business there would certainly be no dispute at all over good and evil; everyone would know what was good and what was bad. But how do things stand today? What morality is preached to us today? There is first Christian-feudal morality, inherited from earlier religious times; and this is divided, essentially, into a Catholic and a Protestant morality, each of which has no lack of subdivisions, from the Jesuit-Catholic and Orthodox-Protestant to loose "enlightened" moralities. Alongside these we find the modern-bourgeois morality and beside it also the proletarian morality of the future, so that in the most advanced European countries alone the past, present and future provide three great groups of moral theories which are in force simultaneously and alongside each other. Which, then, is the true one? Not one of them, in the sense of absolute finality; but certainly that morality contains the maximum elements promising permanence which, in the present, represents the overthrow of the present, represents the future, and that is proletarian morality.

But when we see that the three classes of modern society, the feudal aristocracy, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, each have a morality of their own, we can only draw the one conclusion: that men, consciously or unconsciously, derive their ethical ideas in the last resort from the practical relations on which their class position is based — from the economic relations in which they carry on production and exchange

But nevertheless there is great deal which the three moral theories mentioned above have in common — is this not at least a portion of a morality which is fixed once and for all? — These moral theories represent three different stages of the same historical development, have therefore a common historical background, and for that reason alone they necessarily have much in common. Even more. At similar or approximately similar stages of economic development moral theories must of necessity be more or less in agreement. From the moment when private ownership of movable property developed, all societies in which this private ownership existed had to have this moral injunction in common: Thou shalt not steal [Exodus 20:15; Deuteronomy 5:19]. Does this injunction thereby become an eternal moral injunction? By no means. In a society in which all motives for stealing have been done away with, in which therefore at the very most only lunatics would ever steal, how the preacher of morals would be laughed at who tried solemnly to proclaim the eternal truth: Thou shalt not steal!

We therefore reject every attempt to impose on us any moral dogma whatsoever as an eternal, ultimate and forever immutable ethical law on the pretext that the moral world, too, has its permanent principles which stand above history and the differences between nations. We maintain on the contrary that all moral theories have been hitherto the product, in the last analysis, of the economic conditions of society obtaining at the time. And as society has hitherto moved in class antagonisms, morality has always been class morality; it has either justified the domination and the interests of the ruling class, or ever since the oppressed class became powerful enough, it has represented its indignation against this domination and the future interests of the oppressed. That in this process there has on the whole been progress in morality, as in all other branches of human knowledge, no one will doubt. But we have not yet passed beyond class morality. A really human morality which stands above class antagonisms and above any recollection of them becomes possible only at a stage of society which has not

only overcome class antagonisms but has even forgotten them in practical life. And now one can gauge Herr Dühring's presumption in advancing his claim, from the midst of the old class society and on the eve of a social revolution, to impose on the future classless society an eternal morality independent of time and changes in reality. Even assuming — what we do not know up to now — that he understands the structure of the society of the future at least in its main outlines.

Finally, one more revelation which is "from the ground up original" but for that reason no less "going to the root of things": With regard to the origin of evil,

"the fact that the type of the cat with the guile associated with it is found in animal form, stands on an even plane with the circumstance that a similar type of character is found also in human beings... There is therefore nothing mysterious about evil, unless someone wants to scent out something mysterious in the existence of a cat or of any animal of prey."

Evil is — the cat. The devil therefore has no horns or cloven hoof, but claws and green eyes. And Goethe committed an unpardonable error in presenting Mephistopheles as a black dog instead of a black cat. Evil is the cat! That is morality, not only for all worlds, but also — for cats.

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Frederick Engels. *Anti-Dühring*. Trans. Emile Burns. 1894.

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