

LENIN FIGHTS FOR MATERIALISM

In a previous issue we described Lenin's fight against the anti-materialist philosophy called "neutral monism." Neutral monism claimed that everything is made up of "elements." Elements were advertised as something that is neither mental nor physical, but they turn out to be just sensations and thoughts. In this column we outline Lenin's arguments against neutral monism.

Lenin's Main Arguments

Lenin's arguments concentrated on four points: (1) neutral monism is just a disguised version of subjective idealism, which says there is no world outside of individual minds, and objects are just "complexes of sensations." (2) Neutralism is incompatible with natural science. (3) Neutralism promotes religion. (4) Neutralism is internally inconsistent.

Neutral monism is just subjective idealism

The neutralists liked to claim that they were not idealists but had overcome the opposition between materialism and idealism. Analyzing the writings of the various neutralists, Lenin showed that despite their disagreements with each other, they all claimed that the physical universe is a product of sensations and thoughts. This is the direct opposite of materialism, which recognizes that sensing and thinking can only be done by material beings with nerves and brains.

Neutralism is incompatible with natural science

In the science in Lenin's time, it was already well known that the earth was far older than humans or other living beings. That means that it is impossible for the earth to be a product of sensa-

tions or thoughts, since there was nothing that could feel or think when it came into existence.

This point is a variation on a standard objection to subjective idealism, that if it were right, a tree that fell in the forest would make no sound, since no one could hear it. The standard answer from idealists is to claim that God exists, perceives everything, and hears the falling tree.

Most of the neutralists avoided appealing to God, but tried to wiggle out of their contradiction in other ways. Some claimed that the earth really did not exist before people did. Others claimed that people can mentally "project" themselves into the past, a past that would then consist of their "projected" thoughts. "If we 'mentally project' ourselves," Lenin wrote, "our presence will be imaginary — but the existence of the earth prior to man is real."

Neutralism promotes faith and religion

Alexander Bogdanov, one of Lenin's main opponents, defined truth "an ideological form — an organizing form of human experience." Bogdanov said that "socially organized or objective experience" must "harmonize with the rest of collective experience" and "with the chain of causality."

But Lenin explained that Catholicism fits this definition well. "Catholicism has been 'socially organized, harmonized and coordinated' by centuries of development; it 'fits in' with the 'chain of causality' in the most indisputable manner; for religions did not originate without cause, it is not by accident that they retain their hold over the masses under modern conditions."

The neutral monist approach to truth can't tell the difference between true ideas and false ones that are organized and widely believed. It not only has to say that religions are true but it promotes faith and "fideism," the idea that people should accept as true ideas that aren't supported by the evidence.

The inconsistencies of neutralism

Generally speaking, just looking at the consequences of a philosophical theory is not enough to understand it thoroughly, and critical evaluation of its coherence and consistency is important as well. Lenin included this kind of criticism in his attack on neutralism.

Solipsism is the absurd idea that my mind is the only thing that I can know to actually exist, so that the rest of the universe may exist only in my imagination. Neutral monists were anxious to reject solipsism because accepting it would make their position inconsistent. You can't say that truth is a socially organized experience if society may exist only in your head.

Starting from the neutralist premises, however, Lenin argued that "it is impossible to arrive at the existence of other people besides oneself." If I can't infer that my sensations are caused by real things beyond me then I can't infer that any mind exists other than my own. Thus neutral monism cannot reject solipsism, and hence is absurd as well as reactionary.

*In the next column, we will look at some of the errors and shortcomings of Lenin's book, Mate-
rialism and Empirio-Criticism.*