CHAPTER SIX

SOCIETY AND THE INDIVIDUAL

1. SOCIAL UTILITARIANISM

When the recent Soviet discussions of ethics are examined from the perspective of the history of ethical theory as a whole, one of their more interesting general characteristics can be easily discerned: the framework and terms of these discussions, the problems posed, and the approaches taken toward their solution are remarkably similar to those of the ‘social utilitarian’ doctrines of the eighteenth century French Enlightenment. This is not so surprising when one remembers that Marx himself frequently drew attention to the doctrines of the ‘French materialists’, and more particularly, that Plekhanov wrote extensively on the eighteenth century French materialists. Russians who learned their Marxism through Plekhanov could scarcely fail to be highly conscious of these writers, even forgetting the special fascination which the Philosophes held for the nineteenth century Russian ‘intelligenty’. One of the earliest Soviet works on the history of ethical theory was an article on the ‘social ethics’ of Morelly and Mably, by a student of Deborin.¹

For the eighteenth century social utilitarians, as for Soviet theorists now, the central problem of ethical theory was and is the maintenance of social order. One Soviet philosopher singled out the French materialists, the utopian socialists, and the Russian revolutionary democrats of the nineteenth century as the three principal groups who “firmly insisted on the idea that the social function of morality consists in the regulation of the interrelations between society and the individual”.² The preservation of social order, more particularly the defense of social order against the threat posed by the egoistic individual preoccupied all these groups of ethical theorists.

One may distinguish three broad currents of ethical thought in eighteenth century France: (1) the traditional natural law theorists, including their distant cousins the moral sense theorists, and many of the Christian apologists, (2) the various schools of utilitarian thought, and (3) the Nihilists.³ It is of course for the last two of these trends that the terms and limits of socialization of the egoistic individual constituted the chief preoccupation.

The egoistic individual, bête noir of so many Enlightenment thinkers, was a premise which began to take hold in the late seventeenth century, a product

P. T. Grier, Marxist Ethical Theory in the Soviet Union
of the confluence of many intellectual innovations, especially in cosmology, experimental science, and psychology. The collapse of the Medieval Christian cosmos, the astonishing successes of Newtonian mechanics, and the materialist sensationalist psychology which soon followed, all contributed directly to the conception of the hedonistically-motivated individual, that creature of nature whose motions could be reliably predicted by the universal 'law' (as well as 'Natural Right') of self-interest, just as the motions of physical bodies could be predicted by Newton's universal law of gravitation.

Utilitarianism developed in part as a response to the problem of how to integrate this hedonistically-motivated, self-seeking individual into a social order which would neither be destroyed by his activities nor destroy him in the process. Four different schools of utilitarian thought can be distinguished, according to which of four different 'solutions' were adopted to this problem of the potential clash between the self-interest of the egoistic individual and the social good: (1) the laissez-faire reasoning of Mandeville, Smith and the Physiocrats, (2) the 'social utilitarians' whose doctrines led to the argument for authoritarian control, (3) the argument for enlightened self-interest, which equated virtue with happiness, and (4) the supposition of a benevolent altruism which would outweigh self-interest.

Social utilitarianism began to emerge from the broader tradition of utilitarian thought when thinkers such as Morelly, Helvetius, and Mably began to stress the absolute right of the community to realize its own good, even at the expense of individual rights. The idea of the priority of the social benefit emerged gradually from the natural law tradition via the relatively easy assumption made by many thinkers both in France and England, that 'natural justice' required, and ultimately came to the same thing as, the social benefit. This 'easy' identification came about almost unnoticed in the works of a number of writers who were attracted to the relatively novel concept of the greatest happiness of the greatest number as the standard of right and wrong, and who strongly promoted the utilitarian standard, yet retained references to 'natural law' and 'justice' in such a way as to leave the impression that natural justice remained the ultimate criterion of right and wrong. Where a possible conflict between public utility and natural justice was not explicitly proposed, an equivalence between the two was very often assumed without hesitation.

The leader of the utilitarian movement in France was Helvetius, who was quite unequivocal in adopting a utilitarian concept of justice. He held that justice derives from positive law, and described the greatest happiness of the greatest number as "a principle which contains all of ethics and legislation".4