

MISPLACED MORALITY

We Are in Danger of Giving the Right Answers
to the Wrong Questions.

William Lee Miller

At a recent conference on "ethics and nuclear weapons" a moral theologian established succinctly and precisely, on the basis of Catholic teachings, that nuclear weapons are immoral. Though he granted that it is often necessary to do evil in order to do good, and though he alluded to the historic teaching that, in the course of a just war, it may be necessary incidentally to cause the death of innocent persons, he did not find in these rules sufficient justification for the use of major nuclear weapons.

The multiple evils involved in the nuclear bombing of a great city like Moscow or New York, he pointed out, would be so immense, so incalculable, so central to the act itself, so certain and real, that one could not justify them as an incidental side result that one would "permit" as a secondary effect of the achieving of some overriding speculative "good" (even the defeat of or reprisal against Communist Russia) that the act presumably would accomplish. Rather than commit this evil act a nation should "abandon itself to Divine Providence." Nuclear weapons, said the moralist, are immoral. And he sat down.

This talk (one of the better ones at the conference which was co-sponsored in New York by The Church Peace Union and The World Affairs Center for the U. S.) illustrates both the perennial problem of ethics and politics, and the dramatic exaggeration of that problem in the nuclear age. Perfectly cogent in its own terms, the speech nevertheless seemed perfectly irrelevant to the larger scene. Some other presentations, by morally earnest folk of other persuasions, seemed less cogent and equally irrelevant; they were more-or-less compelling answers to unasked questions. This is the danger we all feel in the ethical discussion of political questions: that we be led by concentrating on "morality" to give the right answers to the wrong questions, and the wrong answers to the right questions. Our correct conclusion to a narrowly conceived ethical question may lead to a mistaken attitude toward the broader field of political choices.

In the case of nuclear weapons, the question the times presents is not exactly whether nuclear bombardment of innocent urban masses, or the effect of radioactivity and genetic deterioration, on humanity, are evil in themselves; obviously they are, and, at the extreme of all-out nuclear war, they are horribly so. The question is not, whether, taken by itself, it would be better that we stop nuclear tests, or that we cease manufacture of nuclear weapons. Obviously, if there were nothing else to consider, it would be.

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But the question we really are stuck with is, given the plentiful and growing existence of the weapons, the danger of nuclear war, the antagonism and expansiveness of Communist power, and the worldwide responsibilities of the United States, what are we to do?

The problem is not a simple, abstract moral issue, but a constant, complicated, political-and-moral situation. For the moral consciousness to make connection with "the art of the possible" it must pay attention to what *is* possible. That probably does not include a nation's abandoning itself to Divine Providence in the face of the Russian missiles.

Ethics and politics are in a constant, ironic tension, because while political decisions tend to have consequences that vastly outweigh the neat individual moral puzzles in the ethics textbook, and to have mammoth ethical significance (the life, death, employment, starvation, happiness, misery, freedom, slavery, of millions of "innocent" humanity near, far, born and unborn, and the state of whole civilizations), the attempt to deal with these decisions in "moral" terms nevertheless tends not only to be irrelevant but even ethically misleading. The biggest ethical questions are the least amenable to purely "ethical" treatment. The right thing in politics is rarely done by the man who tries too intently to do "right"; the moral acts are seldom those suggested by spokesmen who strive explicitly to be "moral."

The moral consciousness, particularly as it has developed in the euphoric American atmosphere, runs toward absolute distinctions of right and wrong, separated out of the historical-political context, divorced from other, possibly contradictory but less dramatic considerations, excluding the moral worth of the self-interest of collectives like the nation, and (most of all) inadequately attentive to the consequences in a particular political situation of a moral conclusion. The moral consciousness drives either toward implicitly assuming that the conditions exist for the realization of its claims or toward saying "no matter what" and "here I stand, God help me, I can do no other" and "do justice though the heavens fall."

But neither assuming that collective altruism is a simple possibility nor striking a "no-matter-what-here-I-stand" posture is ordinarily a very good move for a statesman, or for a citizen in his political role. In politics, where men act not just for themselves but for others, the problem is not to say what would be nice if collective man were good but rather what can be done in the light of the fact that he is not, and the problem is precisely to do as much justice as can be done *without* allowing the heavens to fall.

There is a note of irresponsibility, a subterranean drive toward the luxury of a pure conscience and the satisfying exhilaration of a clear moral stand in much of our desire to make dramatic and absolute denunciations of evils like those associated with nuclear weapons. They tend toward a premature moral heroism. But it will be time enough to be martyrs, one by one, when the bombs are dropped; the problem now is rather to find ways to prevent that from happening.

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