

HOW RELEVANT IS MORALITY?

And How Can it Speak to World Affairs?

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By postulate theology deals with the ultimate in human existence, and therefore a theology of foreign policy is not something irrelevant but rather quite logical. The fact that such a theology has not been developed does not mean that it cannot be developed.

I am not tempted to outline a theology of foreign policy in this article. Rather I would like to make some observations which should be more than random. I wish to stipulate some assumptions first of all. Theology studies reality in terms of God. Now God is the ground of being. He is the Absolute, the ultimate source of reality and explanation. Therefore, man's obligation is unconditionally to do God's will, no matter how God be conceived. Morality, in consequence, has a theological dimension.

The second assumption deals with man. The amoral man is either a non-existent fiction or a psychopathic personality. Likewise, no deliberate action of man escapes the dimension of ethics. Acts of spontaneity, conditioned or unconditioned reflex action, should not be subsumed under moral categories. The beating of the heart is neither moral nor immoral. But deliberate direction of thought and act, because it is deliberate, must necessarily be qualified morally.

The third assumption deals with foreign policy immediately. It is supposed that foreign policy is a deliberate planning of communal human action. In the light of the previous assumption, an obvious corollary comes forth. Foreign policy is subject to the judgment of ethics and theology.

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We have become accustomed to consider the public action of statesmen as not subject to moral judgment so that it astonishes men at large to even suggest that such judgment is relevant. The tendency of our time is to criticize political action exclusively in the light of pragmatism. Does the policy work?

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That is the question. If the answer is affirmative, the policy is declared good. If the answer is negative, the policy is bad. People with ethical interests do from time to time criticize public policy, but their criticism has but little weight in the total community. The leaders of the community, for purposes not always too noble, will point out moral deficiencies in the policies of the enemy. But the purpose seems to be to produce anger and hatred against the foe rather than an awareness of the need of morality in international relations.

Why has public policy become so unconcerned with its moral dimension? The answer is complex, but some elements are clear enough.

In the First Book of Maccabees the story of an ethical issue is told. The Syrians became aware that the Hasmonean troops would not fight on the Sabbath. In consequence, they deliberately chose Saturday as their day of attack. The ethical restrictions accepted by Judas Maccabaeus weakened his side's effort because the enemy was not bound by them. Judas resolved the problem by considering the Sabbath ethic suspended under the circumstances.

The Maccabean solution unknowingly became the forerunner for a wider and rather general solution. The immorality of the attacker suspended ethical codes and foreign policy all too often is mere cold warfare.

This mentality became stronger precisely because the moral obligations imposed on statesmen by religious thinkers and leaders seemed unrealistic. If they were accepted, then the cause of the community was doomed. With impatience the statesmen dismissed the teachings of the moralists, and the general community supported the statesmen in their decision. The consequence is that a moralist's reflection on policy seems to our time utterly fantastic. The moralist is considered an irrelevant nuisance, hampering the effort of the statesmen in their pursuit of the common good.

Perhaps the most important element in our amoral approach to foreign policy is the ethical pluralism of the modern commonwealth. There is only a very vague consensus in the community concerning ethics.

In the generic areas of action there is much agreement, but the application of the accepted principles to concrete cases will be seen differently by different members of society.

All agree that a man should not kill. A Quaker understands this to mean that all warfare is immoral. Some animal lovers seem to think that the principle is somehow to be applied to animals as well as to men. Most members of the community see no inconsistency between the principle and the practice of war and capital punishment. Some, however, think that the use of atomic bombs on enemy cities is illicit killing, though killing the armed soldier in battle is not. For some euthanasia of the incurably sick subjected to much suffering is quite moral and to be permitted. Many believe that abortion under certain circumstances is morally proper, while others call it murder. The consensus that murder is wrong is not helpful when we come to concrete cases of killing.

In the light of such divergency of persuasion, the statesmen have little to guide them. Ultimately they must use their own moral judgment, but this is a subjective process open to all the inconveniences of subjectivism. It is easy for the statesman to bracket the whole moral issue and ignore it in his work. He is confirmed in his attitude by a widespread acceptance of moral relativism. This theory of morality denies that there is any moral absolute. Each case has to be analyzed in its concrete singularity, and whatever moral norms are applied are pragmatic generalizations achieved by the individual or the community empirically.

This situation is anarchic. It does violence to the moral sense of man. Undoubtedly the community as such can feel no moral imperatives because the community can feel nothing. Feeling belongs to individuals alone. In consequence, communal morality as expressed in its positive laws and general practice is laxer than the moral vision of the individuals who make up the body politic. This is not altogether to be deprecated. The laws and the policies of a secular society are not framed to execute the moral law. Much must be tolerated by the commonwealth which in the rigor of ethics cannot be condoned.

But the principle that the community must tolerate much that is objectively immoral does not justify the tacit assumption that state policy, foreign or domestic, transcends ethics. The collectivity is made up of moral persons, and it is this consolidation of persons into a social unity that makes the union moral.

I think that it is safe to say that the norm of

amoral pragmatism for politics is being subjected to withering criticism in our time. Our problem is how can we make ethics dynamically relevant to public policy in the light of the difficulties of such an enterprise.

One easy answer which might at first sight appeal to religious groups is to ask statesmen to follow the enlightened religious conscience of the community. In the abstract, this seems a good solution. In the concrete, I submit, it will not work. Undoubtedly the collective religious conscience of the community will exert positive or negative influence on the men of state. But it will not decisively direct their decisions.

The reasons for this are two. In a society where religion is pluralistic, there may be a coincidence of consciences in certain areas, but there can be no consensus. There is a difference between coincidence and consensus. What is more, the moments of coincidence will not be many. The second reason is that the number of citizens in whom religion is highly dynamic will never be large enough to make a telling impact on the statesmen. Men are generally religious to some degree, but in the vast majority this degree is low. In a society like ours, where every type of religion has its representatives, it is hard to distinguish the religion of a man with whom we have ordinary dealings. His distinctive religion does not make him distinct, and precisely because his religion as a rule is carried lightly.

To try to force government to accept the norms of one religion in its midst is to invite trouble. Religions are divisive forces in a community, not really ties of union. To think that we can unite a people morally because all have some kind of religion is tantamount to uniting a community of varying skin color in its members by an appeal to the irrelevant fact that all have some kind of color.

It is precisely this fact that has encouraged governments to ignore in part or in whole the religious voices in the commonwealth. To take these voices seriously causes so much friction in the total society that it is easier and more satisfactory to treat the religious spokesmen with courteous forbearance. If a given society is united in its religious vision and religion plays an important life in the thought and action of everybody, then religion will direct the efforts of the statesmen along definite ethical lines. But in how many, if any, communities do we find such a situation?

In spite of my pessimism with regard to the efficacy of religion as an ethical guide for the framers of public policy, I still do not wish to support the views of those who think that religion has no public role in human life. In the Biblical tradition valid religion

is worked out not only in the privacy of individual life, but in society as well. As a function of religion, a religious man should study the problems of foreign policy and communicate to others the lights he has received. As history abundantly shows, his main function will be to protest in the name of the living God. And as history also shows, this protest will be either ignored or taken as an occasion to persecute the protesting prophet.

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The only solution that I can see for the problem of making policy-makers conscious of ethical obligation is to bring back to honor the notion of natural law. Yet this word itself causes a malaise for many in our time. One almost hears a groan and the words: "No, not that again!"

This malaise is understandable because of the way the notion of natural law was used in the past. But we must always remember that instances of abuse are no argument against valid use. Natural law is too often conceived mystically. Symbolic expressions like "the law written in the heart of man" do not help to clarify the notion at all. Rather, they distort it.

Perhaps the biggest error made by the older champions of natural law was their attempt to use it as the deductive condensation of a full and complete set of laws for human conduct in every conceivable contingency. They went so far as to insist that positive law was a mere explicitation of logical implicits of some corpus of law written in heaven, Olympus, or what have you. That celestial résumé of law was the natural law. Unfortunately, different devotees of the natural law could not agree on the propositions of the heavenly law which by their postulate was supposed to be translucent to mere reason.

Needless to say, religious thinkers and theologians read the distinctive ethics of their own religious faiths right into the natural law, urging lawmakers to enact them into the codes of the positive law on the supposition that such was the function of the human lawmaker.

Such arbitrary willfulness made the concept of natural law odious. Yet the great masters of natural law like Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas had no such theory of natural law. The natural law is not a law in the sense that a lawyer uses the term. It is the pointer to a philosophical intuition. According to this intuition reality and reason coincide exactly in their structures.

The same truth can be expressed in the following way: the real is rationally structured. This principle is the basis of all thinking and it alone justifies the thinking enterprise of man. We would not bother

to think unless we were convinced that by thinking we achieve the real, enabling us to deal with it adequately. Every thinker in some form or other, with some formula or other, asserts that prior to his thinking effort, reason and the real are built alike, and when I use reason according to its own dynamism, I achieve the real in its own proper being.

Natural law, correctly understood, is never denied by anybody except conceivably by a thorough-going skeptic, but no human can afford the luxury of being so thorough-going.

Belief in natural law brings with it the conclusion that we can act in accord with the nature of things. That is obviously correct action. The use of an article implies a respect for its being; otherwise my action will be sheer abuse. When a man complains that his good machine does not give him the results he had hoped for, the mechanic patiently explains to him either that the machine cannot give such a result, or that the user of the machine has wrongly employed it. Mistreatment of a machine is wrongness—a word which is either ethical or borrowed from ethics. But a machine is only a human contrivance to concentrate economically the rationality of reality. Things do not act differently when harnessed into a machine than they do in isolation.

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The principle of the rational structure of reality allows us to approach problems of action with a norm. The norm is not a law; not a dictate. It is a simple illumination. With this light lawmakers and policy framers can set up rules for their work, but such rules are not logically deduced by a mathematical process. Aquinas wisely saw that the natural law in its application to different cultural situations produced different kinds of laws. In such divergent laws there was a generic commonality. Aquinas did not call the common factor natural law. He called it the law of nations, but meant by it something less arbitrary and conventional than what we call international law.

With a frank and general acceptance of natural law by our thinkers and statesmen, ethics would indeed direct state policy. Natural law is not a religious concept, and it will function in a non-religious atmosphere. It does, however, demand that action be based on something deeper than shallow empiricism and pragmatism. It does suppose that metaphysics is as important as physics or psychology. It does imply that the human spirit can see more than the phenomena of reality. It is an assertion that the human mind can reach *das-Ding-an-sich*, reality in its own being. It is an affirmation that there is a public philosophy, for which Walter Lippmann pleads.

To work out solutions for practical foreign policy problems in the light of natural law is not the concern of this article. The only aim of my observations is to show that there is a way of making ethics relevant to public policy, especially foreign policy. One might wonder why a theologian should offer this solution, since it obviously is not theological.

It is true that there have been theologians who have been disdainful of the natural law concept. Their thinking is pessimistic, contemptuous of the powers of man's reason. Yet their quarrel with reason is not abstract. They are perfectly willing to concede that reason in the abstract is quite godly, but they insist that in sinful man it will never function in a godly way. Such theologians hold for some kind of total depravity of man in all that he is. Yet even these theologians cannot escape man's tyrannical impulse toward rational justification, for they defend their anti-rationalism with the instrument of reason.

In the theology of total depravity there is a solid kernel of truth. Man is subject to Original Sin—or to the Freudian libidinous impulse, if one prefers that term—to describe the drive toward the irrational always operative in man. It is the function of religion to show us a counteracting force capable of supplying us with the balance we need. The term usually used in theology for this counteracting power is grace. But grace falls on the individual, not on a community, even though a community itself may be the medium of grace. Government is something communal, not individual, even though the governor is always an individual.

I submit that we cannot accept the notion that secular society, which is something quite natural, can be propelled in its progress by something supernatural which intrinsically modifies it. The natural state acts by natural forces which God can indeed direct toward ends supernaturally conceived. The natural state must be dealt with in the order it is. We cannot ask it to lift itself out of its situation by pulling at its own bootstraps.

The recognition of Original Sin will discipline our hopes for human action, individual or communal. Even a frank and sincere use of reason will not be thoroughly rational because of the irrational push in all things human. However, even in this precarious condition reason is still our best instrument, and it is the one valid source of criticism and foresight.

Nor will the religious man find the natural law concept too poor for his own witness of faith to the community. Much indeed we cannot know without revelation, but all we do know by revelation can be expressed at least in terms of approximation by the

concepts of natural law. After all, revelation is always expressed in symbols and the symbols are taken from things we know naturally.

This truth was seen, vividly by Plato. In the *Eutrypho* Socrates asks Eutrypho what is justice, and he receives the answer that it is the fulfilling of the will of the gods. Socrates then asks whether an action is just and good because the gods will it, or do the gods will it because it is good in itself. Eutrypho could not answer.

Yet Socrates was proposing the notion of natural law, and he showed that it was necessarily acceptable to the religious man. If by my faith I have an ethics, then I justify my moral scheme by the reflection that God wants it, and, of course, "Thy will be done." However, Plato points out cannily that God's will cannot make the wrong right. Hence God's will shows what is right in itself. God wants the good because it is good. It is not good just because He wants it.

I suspect that in our time these observations will sound flat and unprofitable. But at the risk of seeming uncongenial to our age, I still make them. And I do so because I see no other means for our end.

Certainly we are well aware that a foreign policy unmindful of ethical burdens will bring us and millions of others into misery and distress. Virtuous action may not be triumphant in the moment of its positing, but in the long run it alone will solve the problems which confront man. Nor can we foolishly be consoled with the languid reflection that viciousness always enters into our virtuous deeds. That is true enough, but it still remains true that half a loaf is better than no bread at all.

Relativistic ethics or pragmatism as norms for action are self-defeating. These are not forms of morality, but the very denial of ethics. But we are perforce moral. Kant's romantic phrase, the categorical imperative, had much to recommend it. Morality is categorical, absolute in its demands. Our important task is to find out what morality reality itself exacts. Because an amoral or immoral approach to reality will only shatter reality and ultimately render it useless for man.

Above all I would insist that only by the use of the natural law concept can religious men talk effectively to government and the commonwealth. Within the fellowship of believers we can indeed point out the will of God according to the revelation we have received. But we must remember that such revelation comes by grace, and grace is selective. Not all are chosen, even though all may well be called.