

"How Relevant is Morality?"

*In his article "How Relevant is Morality?", published last month in *Worldview*, Father Gustave Weigel, S. J., proposed a return to the natural law tradition as the necessary means for relating ethics to world affairs. "I would insist," he wrote, "that only by the use of the natural law concept can religious men talk effectively to government and the commonwealth." Three comments on Father Weigel's proposals follow.*

Father Gustave Weigel's article is a fine statement of a concern which I share—that we avoid levelling our ethics down to our strategy. I think that part of the difficulty stems from the fact that our foreign policy has at least two major objectives: the containment of Communist imperialism and the prevention of general war. Both of these objectives have behind them a strong moral sanction, indeed a Christian moral sanction. However, there is no adequate moral guidance for the situation which arises when two such objectives are in conflict with each other.

In general it seems to me that one of the reasons why "natural law" still leaves us with many puzzles is that there is no law that guides us when two or more laws are in tension with each other. In that situation I notice that Catholic moralists make much use of prudence. It is here that for both Catholics and Protestants it is easy for a very loose pragmatism to take over. I believe that there is a place for such pragmatism if moral limits remain.

The truly agonizing perplexity arises when we find that in this area of moral conflict we lose any sense of the limits within which our decisions should be made. Today we seem to have lost the idea that, if the worse comes to worst after a nuclear war has begun, there are still limits to what is permitted. Yet moral scruples are still very powerful in ruling out a preventive war as a real option. There are other reasons for this. We do not have the means by which a decision to launch a preventive war could be made. But I am sure that the moral inhibitions against a preventive war remain very strong. They come from the common conscience that is strongly supported by the religious conscience. But if war should start through an attack upon us, the moral limits are likely to disappear.

Obliteration bombing in the second World War and especially the dropping of the atomic bombs in Japan went beyond all previously recognized moral limits and caused some conflict of conscience in this country. This issue was never squarely faced at the time or since. Mr. Truman, who sincerely believes that his policies are based upon the Sermon on the

Mount, has no regrets about this. I think that we are dealing here with self-deceptions more than with a conscious rejection of morality.

As for the future and for possible acts of retaliation, it seems that there are to be no limits. Planes carrying hydrogen bombs are in the air all of the time and it is the stated policy of the British government that they are to fly to their targets even in response to an attack with conventional weapons. This reflects a real despair. It is recognized that any retaliation is likely to be too late to save the country from destruction and in advance no frightfulness is too great in the deterrent. I think that it is difficult for any of us to exercise moral discrimination about what might be right or wrong in an apocalyptic situation. But the hope that the deterrent may never be used makes it possible to live with it. I think that there is less moral relativism in this than an incapacity to grasp psychologically the meaning of what is at stake.

It is time now to start with our present predicament and work back to some sense of moral limits. The imperatives of our religious ethic require this. But these need not be abstracted from the requirements for survival, for surely in the long run survival depends more upon the moral inhibition against the wanton destruction of people than upon the power to deter.

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In his valuable essay "How Relevant is Morality?" Father Gustave Weigel writes that the only solution he can see for the problem of "making policy-makers conscious of ethical obligation is to bring back to honor the notion of natural law." But, if the natural law is but the reflection of God's own perfection, it seems to me that the issue of our time is not to return the natural law to a place of honor but to return God to a place of honor.

Father Weigel's essay is particularly helpful in that he succeeds in cutting away from the concept of natural law the barnacles of seventeenth century rationalist epistemologies. The natural law, it would appear, is not in Father Weigel's view quite so "natural" as some of its defenders, and critics, make it seem.

This is only to say that both reason and nature conform to the reason and nature of God. The task of the believer is to illumine reality with the intuitions of faith. Revelation makes available a different order of knowledge, but it does not contradict the structure of reason or the possibilities of the real.

And yet, whatever my sympathies with Father Weigel's argument, I still find myself strangely un-

moved by his appeal for a return to "natural law." His argument might seem, almost, a way of stating the apparent. But though the apparent bears restating, repetition does not necessarily make it relevant.

Since all roads of the natural law lead to God, is it not pertinent to ask whether God is as "rational" as the natural law tradition makes Him? I would suggest that we must consider unreason as part of reality, and therefore as part of God's reality.

Because where has all this satisfaction with the reason of God, the reason of the real, the sureties of the rational faculty carried us? We are left now where reason has no honor, the natural law is in disrepute, and God is made increasingly irrelevant to the world's concerns.

I would agree with Father Weigel's implication that the position of Protestant neo-Orthodoxy does not help in the slightest. It is simply not pertinent (except as a means of stimulating the tear-ducts of remorse) to dwell on the depravity of man. I cannot believe in man's depravity; I doubt his original sin (although I do not doubt the universality of sin); but I am certain that unreason *exists* in the universe and that only reason and divine compassion can overcome it.

To speak, however, as though the irrational is a mere privation, absence, lack in the universe—as the natural law tradition does—seems to me to oversimplify and distort the nature of reality itself. For this reason, the natural law tradition, even as it is explained by Father Weigel, still strikes me as irrelevant to the actual condition of the world.

ARTHUR COHEN

Father Gustave Weigel holds correctly that foreign policy is subject to the judgments of ethics and theology. He wishes to provide a moral foundation for international policy through a revised form of natural law theory as an alternative to sheer expediency, shallow empiricism, and pragmatism. I wish he had defined more precisely and developed more fully what his revised moral theory means.

I concur that moral law provides a rational foundation for judgments of social policy. There would seem to be fundamentally four logical levels of such moral law which as a system provide a coherent ethical structure. There is, first of all, formal moral law which demands consistency in making universal judgments and integrity in keeping agreements. Here I would place what is valid in the formalism of Kant and the categorical imperative.

A second level of moral law deals with norms for considering and reevaluating values. These are methodological and regulatory. They require a survey of relevant values, the consideration and weighing of consequences, the choosing of relevant values, the selection of the best possible, and the control of present situations by ideal values.

A third level of the moral law recognizes that formal and axiological norms serve persons who are the intrinsic values and who may never be used as means but always as ends. These personalistic laws of ethics recognize that without personality no other values exist, and that unless personality is valued all else is devalued. At this level, self-regarding and other-regarding judgments must be guided by an ideal of personality which gives unity to other moral judgments.

A fourth level of the moral law provides communitarian norms. Persons are members of social groups and of mankind. They must therefore develop norms of cooperation, social devotion, and of the type of community which is the ideal expression of personal fulfillment. This level of moral law stresses the duty of critical, creative and responsible participation of persons in group life generally and more specifically in the decision-making processes of society.

Such a system of norms does not predetermine the cultural, political, or economic content of codes or policies. It simply provides the norms of making ethical judgments and applies everywhere in the world.

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