

The Moral Concern

Washington, D. C.

Sir: A great deal has been written and said in recent years in support of a "realistic" position on basic domestic and world issues. It does seem that it is time to look a bit more sharply at what is being offered as a realistic moral position. Mr. William Lee Miller's article, "Misplaced Morality," which was published in your January issue, and several of your subsequent articles and editorials provide cases in point.

Mr. Miller's article is a plea for "realism" in the treatment of current problems of war and peace. He asserts that the effort to apply ethical principles (laws, values) to reality often leads to "a dreadful foreshortening of the ethical assumptions and a misreading of the reality," and claims that it is "usually better in political ethics that a man apply himself critically to a concrete situation than that he apply a law or principle deductively to a theoretical problem."

Are such statements adequate? One must wonder just how a man is to "apply himself critically" to a concrete situation in political ethics, if he does not apply a moral law or principle. If the business of politics is the maintenance of the instruments of order for the sake of the best life of man, the ends of politics are set by ethics and not by politics itself. The moralist is directly occupied with what is to be known, theoretically, concerning the nature of man and with what is to be realized, practically, of human capabilities in a complete life. The theoretical understanding of human life, it would seem, must be brought to any consideration of the concrete situation if the criticism of this situation is to be a *moral* criticism.

The business of ethics in its prescriptive phase is to make moral judgments and to propose moral means to moral ends. The particulars of the situation cannot be taken to qualify the judgment of what in general is good or bad (right or wrong, etc.) in the situation, although the knowledge of circumstances must bear directly upon the determination of the means required to achieve (or to maintain) what is good or to eliminate what is bad.

If there can be no moral criticism without the application of ethical principles to reality, there is no need to talk of the misreading of reality except as a contingency. Where the moralist talks about reality, therefore, the focus should be upon what is requisite in a given situation in order to promote or to sustain

what in general is good for man. There would be a misreading of reality only if there is the attempt to apply moral principles or to accommodate moral prescription to a situation without distinguishing between the invariant and the variable in the situation. And here the misreading is as likely to be committed by the realist as by the absolutist.

It is certainly not fashionable in this day to speak of moral absolutes and it has become as unfashionable, strangely enough, with religious thinkers as with philosophers and social scientists. But if the religious man recognizes moral absolutes, why is he afraid to talk in these terms? If the Christian believes in love, justice, and mercy, he should not be afraid to say that an act such as the nuclear bombing of a city is *absolutely* wrong. This raises, of course, the whole question of what of human good is to be preserved if we are committed to nuclear war, or at least to the prevention of attack through the threat of retaliation with nuclear weapons, and what of human good is to be lost if we abandon our nuclear weapons. The most obvious reason for reliance upon nuclear weapons is the guarantee of physical security for ourselves and our allies in the face of the threat of Soviet power. And what, it may be asked, would one offer as an alternative which would not be practically absurd?

The simple truth is, it seems, that ethics cannot offer any proposal which from the perspective of the realist would not appear to be irrelevant and naive. If men are committed to survival (or to security or to the preservation of their historic privileges) at all costs or at least on their own terms alone, any appeal to love, justice, and mercy is beside the point. The question remains, however, whether we must be committed to any of these, either as private citizens or as officers of the state.

The moralist with his absolutes is in a very real sense the most important person in our society today. For he has the task (and indeed the opportunity) of hammering away constantly at all pretensions to realism in the hope that the whole perspective on where our treasure is laid up may be changed. It is certainly conceivable that man can exist without nuclear weapons and without war. Indeed, it now appears that if he is to survive at all he will do so only through renouncing both of them.

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