

RIGHT AND WRONG CALCULATION

Paul Ramsey

"Calculation is the life blood of politics," writes Ernest W. Lefever, "*and the heart of ethics*" ("The Ethics of Calculation," *Worldview*, October, italics added). This statement should be subjected to thorough scrutiny, and searchingly criticized.

Indeed, calculation is the heart of ethics as Mr. Lefever understands it. For this reason, there is for him no particular difficulty about making ethico-political judgements; and there is little to disturb or limit the "moral-political calculations" of which he speaks, since the heart of morality was already assumed to be calculative. Research the facts and weigh them properly: this is about all that is needed in politics; and, happily, also about all it is the business of ethics to do.

Of course, uniquely ethical terms are used at decisive points in this analysis; and they have to be understood and not dismissed for not playing an effective role. What is meant by the statement that "principles, goals and values are inescapably involved in all political decisions"? It seems clear in the context of the whole article that the words "principles" and "values" perform the same function and have the same place in relation to political decision and action as the word "goals." Mr. Lefever writes that "no statesman can make policy from principles alone"; and this sentence is followed immediately by: "He must relate goals and ideals to the political facts of life." It is not wrong to regard the second sentence as bearing a relation of "Hebrew parallelism" to the first; and to conclude that the word "principles" means the same as the words "goals" and "ideals."

We may reach the same conclusion from considering Mr. Lefever's assertion about George Kennan's "disengagement" proposals: "They emerged from a rational attempt to relate facts to values, which certainly included a calculation of the probable consequences of competing policies." Here, it may be allowed, not all "consequences" are "values"; but still values are always only among the consequences, and there is no value (or moral "principle") that is not among the consequences and therefore correctly related to action through calculation. A "principle" operates in this analysis of politics in the same way as a "value"; and a "value" means a "goal" or "ideal"—perhaps even a "dream."

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This means that, in Mr. Lefever's opinion, ethics is *wholly future-facing*; and *therefore*, since obviously calculation is future-facing, ethics and political calculation go nicely together, and in fact calculation is the heart of ethics. Far from this being the case, we must affirm to the contrary that a wholly teleological view of ethics amounts to the suspension of ethics. This is the case whether our goals are spiritual or material, whether the ideals or values we seek are believed to be on earth or in heaven. If no more can be said about the morality of *action* than can be derived backward from the future goal, thus unrolling toward the present the path that we shall have to tread by deeds determined by calculating their utility, ethics has already more than half-way vanished, i.e., it has *become* calculation of the means to projected ends.

Of course, these ends, goals, values toward which "moral-political calculation" is directed may themselves be high and mighty important ones, and it does make a great deal of difference what are the goals or values a society seeks. Still, this is to say that there is nothing that should not be done which a future-facing calculation seems to require; and no action which can be calculated to produce the described result which should not *therefore* be defined as good. Such a view has to be rejected as the suspension of a great part of ethics, without in any sense minimizing the significance of calculation for both ethics and politics.

Protestant Christian ethics today comes from a long line of prudent people. The pacifism which between the world wars spread widely in the non-peace churches, the non-pacifism which gradually overcame this as World War II approached and which continues today, the increasing pragmatism of the Niebuhrians, the rejection of natural law and "middle axioms" in favor of contextualism and the study of "decision making"—all this has been largely a matter of determining the "lesser evil" or perchance the "greater good," and, by a calculation of the facts, finding the path along which action should be directed in order to defend or secure some sort of values at the end of the road toward which action reaches, yet never reaches. This is an ethic well calculated to reduce every present reality—people and principles no less than facts—altogether to what they may do to bring in the future. Against this, it should be affirmed that "prudence" has rightly to be understood to be in the service of some prior principle, whether in application of natural law principles or (if, as I believe, these alone are inadequate) in application of divine charity.

No one can read the so-called Dun report of the Federal Council of Churches ("The Christian Conscience and Weapons of Mass Destruction", Decem-

ber, 1950) without feeling the moral confusion beneath its weak rejection of "total" war. The "sense" in which total war was repudiated was there defined as "war in which all moral restraints are thrown aside and all the purposes of the community are fully controlled by sheer military expedience"; and this clearly meant, in the main, wanton killing or a savagery that kills without reckoning: "We cannot, therefore, be released from the responsibility for doing no more hurt than must be." In other words, the main consideration effective in this report was the prudential balancing of effects, of greater against lesser evils.

When prudence stands so nearly alone, and only in the context of a teleological ethic, it is not surprising that for long stretches of the way, with the exception of a few unassimilated sentences about the moral immunity of non-combatants, this report sounds rather like a statement of standards for the Housing, Care and Surgical Handling of Laboratory Animals. After all, in the latter case no one countenances wanton cruelty, and the teleologically suspended ethics of the code of the S.P.C.A. is quite capable of ruling that it is "immoral" to use methods that cause laboratory rats more pain and maiming without commensurate medical or scientific decisiveness. This outlook has not yet come upon any crucial moral considerations.

Robert L. Calhoun, therefore, was quite correct when in his minority statement he wrote concerning the majority opinion: "The norm of practically effective inhibitions turns out to be, after all, military decisiveness; but beyond ruling out wanton destructiveness, Christian conscience in war time seems to have chiefly the effect (certainly important but scarcely decisive) of making Christians do reluctantly what military necessity requires." Not only a pacifist like Calhoun should be able to say this, but anyone from whose conscience the principles of the just war doctrine have not been completely eroded, as against mere future-facing calculation of consequences. The morality of means referred to in the "justified" war theory meant more than the inert weapon as such; it meant the *conduct* of war as such, the *action* as a whole and its nature, which had a morality or an immorality not wholly swallowed up in consequences or in motive to ends believed to justify any action that may be thought to have military decisiveness.

Mr. Lefever's reduction of ethics to calculation leaves him unable properly to understand George Kennan's recent pronouncements on nuclear tests and nuclear weapons, and incapable of pointing out what has been correct and what mistaken in Kennan's statements. He cites, for example, the latter's remark about the danger from nuclear fallout: "Whoever gave us the right, as Christians, to take even one

innocent life?" This, Mr. Lefever says, illustrate "Mr. Kennan's nonchalant attitude toward facts and calculation in the area of nuclear weapons." Actually, this shows the one grave mistake Kennan has made in the use of ethical *principles*; and this need to be corrected before Mr. Lefever or anyone else launches upon a calculation of the facts which Kennan is supposed to have refused, nonchalantly or otherwise.

The basic error in theoretical analysis is that in what he says about the *future* innocents who may die as a result of present tests, Mr. Kennan treats the probable *effect* of our present actions as if it were a *means* at present employed to obtain the ends we desire. The time-sequence of the acts put forth by men or nations cannot be reversed in this way. All action thrusts toward the future, and many or most actions have double or multiple effects or consequences in the future; and this raises questions of a different order from the ethics of the means or the nature of the present action as such.

Granted that the death of one child from man-made leukemia will be evil in itself, there is a significant distinction still to be made between whether this is an *effect* among many other good and evil effects that will result from our present course of action, or whether it is a *means* which, intentionally and in and of itself, objectively as well as subjectively, is ordered to the achieving of some choice-worthy goal.

While the end may never justify the means, one effect justifies another effect, in the sense that an evil, unavoidable effect may be produced if that is the only way, by action not wrong in itself, to secure some very good result. Now we come, and only at this point, do we come, to the proper work of calculation, in the comparison of effects, weighing their gravity, estimating the sufficiency of the reasons for them, and balancing greater against lesser goods or lesser evils.

To no one except Mr. Lefever will it seem that Kennan's "implied judgment that all bomb tests under all circumstances are morally wrong seems to be based in part upon a picture of fallout danger that bears little resemblance to the findings of leading research institutions in this country and abroad." How can it seriously be suggested that Kennan calculated, or *mis*calculated, his way to the absolute judgment about not taking one innocent life? If this was mistaken as applied to nuclear tests, it was a mistake *in principle*, in not distinguishing between taking human life as a means, and unavoidably taking human life as one of the indirect effects of action, to some good end.

Presumably there will be a degree of genetic havoc, and an increase by an unknown number of the cases of leukemia, to result from joint underground nuclear explosions, recently proposed by Mr.

Selwyn Lloyd, since a "negligible" amount of radiation will leak out through cracks in the mountain, but a possible result may also be a greater likelihood of agreement on banning future tests because the nations may learn how to perfect the instruments for detecting them. Mr. Lefever should say to Mr. Kennan: this good and that evil have to be calculated and weighed the one against the other; and your refusal to pay proper attention to the facts results from your failure to see that a possibly evil effect that may follow along with good effects from any action is not to be understood as an immoral means causally conducive to one of these other effects as an end.

Then only will the ground in morality be made secure beneath Mr. Lefever's own contentions: (1) "Genetic damage resulting from tests or general war or both, like the number of automobile deaths in the United States, is well within the range of what a civilized society is prepared to tolerate." (2) "A policy designed to save ten thousand persons from possible future death by radioactivity which had the actual effect of inviting the death of ten million persons today could hardly be called morally responsible or politically wise."

No one should wince at these statements, *provided* it is clear that a society engaging in these calculations as to the indirect effects of action would already have become uncivilized if it engages at all in a like calculation at another point, i.e., if it might under certain circumstances be persuaded that the life of one or the lives of ten or ten thousand may be directly repressed simply as a means that good may come of it.

But Mr. Lefever jumps altogether over the morality of action when at another point he becomes absorbed in calculations—calculation which is always only a subordinate part of moral judgment and to be entered upon logically only after the ethical guidelines of action have been fixed. "According to the best projections available," he writes, "the *maximum* possible loss of life from a general nuclear war involving the full present capacities of the Soviet Union and the United States would be about twenty percent of the earth's population. The number killed might well be considerably less. There would be practically no casualties of any kind south of the equator . . . If calculations of those in the best position to know are reasonably accurate, the worst nuclear war possible now would leave eighty percent of the earth's population alive and healthy."

It is not that this calculation in the case of nuclear war, like David, has already killed its ten thousands, while calculation in the case of nuclear testing, like Saul, has already killed only its thousands. At its heart, ethics counts not in quantities and, as Kant

said, you cannot do morality a greater disservice than by *deriving* it from experience. It is rather that the death and devastation contemplated in the case of all-out nuclear war would be both *directly willed* and *directly done* as a means, while the death brought about by nuclear testing *as such* is only *indirectly willed* and *indirectly done* as one among several effects of the tests.

The first is murder, the second tragic. In the one case, death to the innocent is the instrument used for defense or victory; in the other case, death to the innocent is a foreknown side-effect of action done in such a way as may be judged to be good, or at least neutral, in itself, and to be necessary to obtain great good results. The latter calculation concerning nuclear tests may be wrong; but in the former case it would be wrong to calculate and count on the good or less evil consequences that may come from a wrong done (acts of all-out nuclear war).

The recent utterances of George Kennan have all been, not calls to abandon calculation, but to abandon calculation in the wrong place, in the place of fundamental moral principle. He has tried to recall us to the only doctrine of civilized warfare the West has known, to a reexamination as a "straight issue of conscience" of the degree of acceptance of indiscriminate bombing by nuclear weapons that is present in our nuclear deterrence policy, and to call us back from our apparent willingness to rest our security (as he said recently to the Women's Democratic Club in Washington, D.C.) on weapons designed to "destroy innocent noncombatant human life, including the lives of children, on a vast scale," back from "an infinitely costly and hopeless exercise in reciprocal menace" by means which it would be vastly immoral ever to use.

There can be no greater evil, I take Kennan to be saying, than the act of *using* unlimited weapons all-out; and the one thing worse than to suffer such an evil would be to do it. Sophistry has always opposed a Gorgias who declares this to be the case. Kennan is quite right, no calculation taught him this, nor should calculation be allowed to deprive him or us of a forever valid moral judgment.

It is interesting that at one point Mr. Lefever speaks of the lack of statesmanlike utility to be found in "Mr. Kennan's manners and principles." It is very true that the latter's principles, like his "sheer good manners," would be falsified and dispelled if either were sought to be leveled to the one dimension of their future-facing consequences. Good manners like good morals are never qualities wholly teleologically oriented or derived; and while calculation is of service to both, it cannot be the heart of either. Manners and morals have, in different ways, to do with the definition of right *conduct* and not

only with the ends of action; with the *how* and not only with *what* we do or the *whither* of our deeds.

Mr. Kennan has not confused manners with morals or manners with policy, as Mr. Lefever asserts, unless the substance of policy and of morals is supposed to embrace only "moral-political calculation" and to be exhausted in their teleological reference to the goals of action. It is altogether praiseworthy that Kennan has emphasized that the principles of political conduct, or the conduct of politics, govern action as such in more ways than is required by a calculative utility. It is good also that Kennan, experienced as he is the practice of diplomacy, assures amateurs who are apt to believe such principles to be reeds shaken by every wind that blows from over our future goals, and apt also, as outsiders to affairs of state, to believe realistic calculation affords a greater surety and a clearer direction, that a statesman's "farsightedness and powers of calculation" alone may often not be worth relying on. He calls us neither to policies guided only by principles without calculation (as do some neo-pacifists) nor (as do many of his critics) to policies guided only by prudent calculation and doubtfully controlled by "ideals."

In this sense, Mr. Lefever, not Mr. Kennan, is the "idealist" in politics. The idealist is one who goes on his way and finds his way under the lure of such goals as the greatest good of the greatest number, etc. A realist is one who knows that there are many ways that reasonably may be supposed to lead there, ranging all the way from the noblest to the most wicked political decisions and actions; and he reminds the calculative idealist that in politics he had better know more than this about right and wrong conduct.

We shall have to know more than this if mankind in the state of modern civilization is going to make it around the next turn. Those who say that it may not be possible for us to limit warfare are *almost* certainly correct. Surely war will never be kept a just enduring human enterprise if it is sought to be kept limited only "by political objectives, and

therefore limited in terms of the weapons employed," and if fear alone is invoked to restrain the means. Limited ends do tend to moderate the means ventured and caused to be mounted in return, and the cost paid and exacted in warfare.

But not only the military force made possible by modern technology works against our being able to achieve the control of warfare by aiming at modest ends, but also the endless restless aspiration of the human spirit, which displays its want of heaven even in the towering attempts at grandeur and wickedness with which history is replete. Moreover, ends and means interpenetrate; and this can be as well read in the other direction: limited (or unlimited) means or weapons are available and resolved to be used, and therefore limited (or unlimited) political objectives may be thought to be proper goals in war. Calculative morality and politics cannot dispense with exhortations to people to adopt only limited goals, and therefore it must rely upon a revival of this aspect of the moral tradition of civilized warfare.

At the same time there is need for a re-creation, in both thought and feeling, of the moral tradition of civilized warfare as to the right *conduct* of war and the moral limitation to be placed upon means. Surely, the immunity of noncombatants from indiscriminate, direct attack may come again to govern the consciences of men as readily or with as great improbability as they will set limits to the political objectives they pursue.

It would ill behoove churchmen, in this land that so dramatically overstepped this moral limit, not to follow the lead Mr. Kennan has given. For, rightly understood, his is not a rejection of calculation in its proper place, nor a neo-pacifism based on a new religious absolutism inserted into politics where it is alien, but a reconstruction of the ancient theory of "justified" warfare, which always supposed that war for the wrong ends and war conducted contrary to the natural (rational) law of war as a just barely human enterprise (however immoral means may be calculated to be required by political objectives) was not so to be engaged in by either just or good Christian men.

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