

THE RECOVERY OF ETHICS

Our Task Is to Discover a Framework that Commends Itself to the Modern Mind

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There are a host of issues facing us today which pose an ethical problem in the field of foreign policy. What kind of international order will prevail in the future? Will it be one compatible with ideas, principles, and political structures such as those we enjoy in the United States while offering a place within that structure to Communist states? Or will it be an international structure designed by and compatible with the objectives of the Communist states while offering a possibility of coexistence to us and to other states similarly organized?

Under what types of circumstances, if any, should we continue nuclear tests? Under what circumstances, if any, should we actually use nuclear weapons? Under what circumstances, if any, should we use nuclear weapons to enforce our views of what is just and equitable in the relations between nations? Under what circumstances, if any, should we use firm measures to keep our allies from engaging in unjust or imprudent actions? What non-coercive measures are appropriate to what kinds of international purposes? What economic or political sacrifices are we justified in making or requiring of others for what purposes? How should one choose between competing or conflicting political objectives or political groups?

It can perhaps be objected that these questions are too general to permit specific answers. But we still are faced with issues which involve ethical judgments even if we make our questions more specific. The more specific we make our questions the more significant become issues of fact. But even after we have settled all the issues of fact there will remain an irreducible element which poses an ethical judgment.

Others may object that many political questions can be resolved only by the competitive exercise of power and that ethical choice has little place. This objection also falls upon closer analysis.

Werner Heisenberg, the German Nobel physicist

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who developed the principles of quantum theory, tells a story which illustrates the point. He describes a conversation which he had with a theological student during the revolutionary struggles which racked Germany in 1919. Heisenberg was seventeen years old and was attached to a military unit in Munich during a period when the center of the city was occupied by Communists. Every noon the unit fetched its lunch from a field kitchen in the yard of a theological seminary. Heisenberg describes the discussion with the student as follows:

"One day we became involved in a discussion with a theological student on the question of whether this struggle in Munich was in truth meaningful. One of our group took the stand that questions of power could not be decided by intellectual means, by speech making and writing; the real decision between us and the others could only be determined by force, he declared.

"Thereupon the theology student replied that the very question of who were 'we' and who 'the others' were obviously depended upon a purely intellectual decision; and that probably a good deal would be gained if this decision were made somewhat more intelligently than was usually the case. We could find no good reply to this argument." Heisenberg ends the story with the comment that perhaps it might not be so bad if we were to teach youth not to despise the values of the mind.

If it is true, as I believe it is, that foreign policy decisions, along with political decisions in general, involve an irreducible ethical content, how do we go about discovering the relevant ethical framework and how do we describe and justify that framework in terms which commend themselves to belief by the mind of the modern world? Many would say that these are the problems on which theologians and philosophers have broken their skulls for generations, leaving us in the state of intellectual chaos in which we now find ourselves, and that there is little hope that we can do better than to add to the confusion. I take a different view. It seems to me that there is today a convergence of a number of factors which give grounds for hope that rigorous effort can, in the not too distant future, restore a glimmering of light in the existing darkness.

One of these factors is to be found in the developments of modern science and in the implications for philosophy of those developments. One cannot read the more general writings of the leading contemporary scientists without coming away with the conviction that most of the intellectual blocks which classical physics seemed to throw in the path of belief in a meaningful ethic are on the way out. That blind mechanical determination which flowed from Newtonian mechanics and which seemed inconsistent with ethically oriented and responsible human will no longer find scientific support. Potentiality is restored to a position of reality. The gulf between mind and matter is no longer in principle unbridgeable. Man need no longer feel that there is an inherent contradiction between his instinctive knowledge that he is a part of a meaningful universe and a cold science, in which he felt he must believe because of its vast success in elucidating so much of the natural world, but which appeared to cut his essential spirit entirely out from that world.

One of the most important features of the development and analysis of modern physics is that, as knowledge expands, the concepts of ordinary language seem more stable than do precise terms of scientific language. The scientific language is derived as an idealization from limited groups of experimental phenomena. Scientific concepts are derived from experience by refined experimental tools and are precisely defined through axioms and definitions. Only through these precise definitions is it possible to connect them with a refined mathematical scheme and derive mathematically the full variety of phenomena possible in the particular field covered by the experiments. Scientific concepts provide a very close fit to the observable results of experiments upon that part of nature accessible to precise measurement and subsumable under mathematically tight deductive systems of scientific concepts. But they may not fit at all with other parts of nature.

The concepts of ordinary, natural language, on the other hand, are formed by an immediate connection with reality over many generations. They represent the human mind, not merely that portion accessible to certain types of precise measurement. Ordinary language concepts may not be precisely defined but they do not lose touch with reality. They may be somewhat modified over the ages. But they are not subject to sudden and complete falsification by a few unexpected results of scientific experiment.

The general trend of thought in the nineteenth century had been toward an ever-increasing and widespread confidence in the scientific method and toward a corresponding skepticism with regard to those concepts of the natural language, like

mind, soul, life, purpose, duty, justice and God, which do not fit into the closed frame of scientific thought. Twentieth century physics at first increased this skepticism, but then skepticism turned against the over-estimation of precise scientific concepts and finally against skepticism itself. It was finally realized that that part of reality covered by scientific concepts is very limited, and the part not covered by them is unlimited. "Understanding," even of the part covered by scientific concepts, must always be based finally upon the natural language. Hence Heisenberg and others conclude that we must be skeptical about skepticism with regard to this natural language and the essential concepts referred to by it. In this way the door is reopened which seemed to be shutting on the possibility of an ethical view of the world not in contradiction with the modern world of science.

Similarly, the climate of belief with respect to all fundamental ideas of philosophy, the concepts of ontology, epistemology, of logic, has shifted from that which pervaded much of the nineteenth century and much of this century. No longer do people look at one askance if one says that logical positivism is an inadequate approach to the sum total of reality. Today the writings of a man such as Charles S. Pierce, which received little public attention during his lifetime, are republished and widely commented upon. As confidence in the completeness of our understanding of the material structure of the universe has declined, the stature of the concepts of relation and of mediation has risen to a point where the reality of general ideas, such as duty and justice, is on a par with the reality of the concepts of atomic particles and of simultaneity and of position. And our confidence in our ability to know about and to reason with respect to these general ideas has similarly be restored.

The second factor which seems to me to converge in indicating that one can have grounds for hope that progress can be made in discovering an ethical framework commending itself to belief by the mind of the modern world is the factor of need. I do not mean to imply that merely because something is needed, it is possible. Rather my point is that when the need is not evident and immediate, people are not apt to take the pains to get to the bottom of difficult questions.

For many generations it appeared to Americans that this country was getting along very well indeed. Our founding fathers had wrestled with the basic question of the relationship of politics to fundamental philosophic and ethical concepts and had produced the United States Constitution. The political institutions which flowed from the Constitution might need minor modification from time to time, but there was little need to rethink the basic philosophic ideas behind them. That had been done and

the results were obviously good. Anyone who might try to tackle the extremely difficult job of thinking the problems through afresh must be some manner of crank. Today the context is changed. The future no longer looks obviously good. To tackle the job of thinking through to fundamentals does not today convict one of being a crank.

The third factor which impresses me is that ideas and ways of approaching the problem of politics and ethics are now being exchanged among those thinking and writing in this field which offer the prospect of clarifying and simplifying the analysis. These ideas may not be new. Most useful ideas are not novel. But in combination, they suggest, to me at least, the possibility that a major step forward can now be made toward clarity and understanding.

Let me mention a few of these ideas. First there is the idea that one of the basic questions of politics is that of the "we" and the "they." In any particular context, who is it that is considered to be "we" and who is considered to be the "they"?

Second, there is the idea that any individual participates in an overlapping system of a number of such "we" structures. Third is the idea that associated with each individual and with each group with which he is affiliated there are overlapping systems of value which are connected with his purposes and the purposes and the functional requirements of each group.

Fourth is the idea that over and beyond the values of any particular array of groupings of human beings there exists an ethical framework which has objective validity, of which men can aspire to have some degree of understanding—not perfect, but approximate—and which can give a measure of insight and of guidance to those who seek it.

An important thing about these four ideas in combination is that they make possible a distinction between the values associated with the purposes and interests of an individual and the groups with which he is associated and the ethical framework pursuant to which ethical judgments as between conflicting value systems are to be judged. The fourth idea, the idea that it is possible to rise above both individual value systems and socially formed value systems and obtain some approximate insight as to the nature of an objective ethical framework over and above those value systems is obviously closely related to the traditional concept of natural law.

Let us briefly examine the problem of ethics and foreign policy in the light of these four ideas. To be specific, let us assume we are looking at the problem from the point of view of the Secretary of State of the United States.

The Secretary has certain individual distinctions of personal character and personal ambition. He has

duties and obligations to the State Department organization which he heads and which looks to him for leadership. He is a member of the Executive branch of government, at present operating under a mandate to the Republican Party and a Republican President. He takes his oath of office to uphold the United States Constitution and the faithful execution of the laws.

Even in this highly simplified description of the Secretary's relationship to "we" groups internal to the state, we see a complex of international interests, duties and responsibilities—in short, values. Conflicts of values associated with these different groups arise daily and must be brought into convergence or resolved on some basis. In this context, the primacy of values associated with the nation can be presumed generally to take precedence over those associated with the Secretary as an individual, with the State Department as an organization, or with the Republican-controlled Executive as a branch of government. Nevertheless, even at this level, the harmonizing, integration and concurrent pursuit of multiple values is involved.

When we proceed to the next level and consider the interplay of value systems on the international scene—from the standpoint of the American Secretary of State—we run into similar complexities. The Secretary has a primary obligation and responsibility to the interests of the United States as a nation-state; at this level the people of the United States are the "we", and all other peoples are the "they". The Secretary, in representing the coalition system and alliance systems of which the United States is a leading member, has obligations and responsibilities to a much wider "we" group of nations and peoples. If the thesis is accepted that a principal task of United States foreign policy is today the construction and defense of a world system of order to replace that shattered in the two world wars, then the values to be pursued by the Secretary of State include those associated with a "we" group virtually coterminous with mankind as a whole.

We have now reached a level of complexity which does not lend itself to simple methods of analysis. Not only are the value systems associated with each "we" group complex; we now have overlapping "we" groups of expanding comprehensiveness to deal with.

At this point a few general observations on value systems appertaining to an individual nation-state may be pertinent. No single value—such as survival, security, power, wealth, prestige, respect, influence or freedom to actualize its potentialities without unwanted outside interference—can be posited as the supreme value in relationship to which the

other values are to be regarded merely as means. Neither are principles ordering the relationship of means to ends to be regarded as absolutes. What is involved is a complex of interrelated values and principles which in the aggregate define the direction and character of the energy comprising the nation-state. The politician may be able to deduce and define with reasonable precision the interests of a state at a given time in history, in a given context and in the light of currently accepted general values for the state. But judgment concerning the adequacy or rightness of those general values of a nation-state requires a process more akin to aesthetics than to deductive logic or to the scientific method.

Furthermore, the values to be maximized are indeterminate as to time. They are not merely to be assessed over the immediate present or in their relation to some future point in time. They are to be integrated over an extended period including the present and the indefinite future. Looking back over other states in past historical eras, one should not assess the values actualized, for instance, by the Athenian city-state merely for their contribution to later civilizations, nor slight them because the Athenian city-state did not indefinitely survive. It is only reasonable to judge that the actualization of values by the Athenians had a component of worth in itself.

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What has been said above with reference to the nation-state applies with perhaps even greater force to the values to be associated with Western civilization, with the free world, and most generally, with mankind of today and of the indefinite future. And the values associated with each of these are not identical with, although at many points they may converge with, the values associated with the United States as a nation-state.

Earlier it was suggested that the concept "ethical framework" be distinguished from the concept of value systems associated with particular groups or even a limited system of interrelated groups. It was suggested that the phrase "ethical framework" be reserved for those approximate insights into objective value standing above earthbound value systems. Such insights, at a minimum, can be said to relate to the traditional idea of natural law; at a maximum, they can be said to relate to the insights of religion.

Being myself innocent of any theological training or discipline, I prefer to restrict myself to the minimum approach, that relating to natural law and philosophy.

I suggest that the following points have a bearing on the problem of finding some applicable content for such an ethical framework.

The first is the presupposition that the universe and that life are purposeful.

Professor Arnold Brecht of the New School for Social Research has recently reemphasized the point that the entire structure of the scientific method depends on accepting the presupposition of consubjectivity, the acceptance of the real identity of an object observed by several persons. The scientific method cannot by its own method prove that consubjectivity exists. It accepts this presupposition on grounds of common sense.

That the universe and life are characterized by purpose similarly cannot be proved by the scientific method. The common sense grounds for accepting this ethical presupposition, however, seem fully as solid as those for accepting consubjectivity.

The second point is that the general direction of that purpose is not wholly beyond the insight of man. Common sense again rejects the proposition that if the universe is purposeful, that purpose is trivial. It is possible to conceive of highly trivial conceptions and then of less trivial and still less trivial conceptions. A highly trivial conception, for instance, would be that the purpose of the universe is to maximize on a given day the production of bathtubs. A less trivial, but still basically trivial, conception would be that the purpose of the universe is to maximize the material satisfactions of mankind over the span of existence of mankind. If any distinction can validly be made between degrees of triviality, the general direction in which the non-trivial is to be found is, in principle, established.

Third, mankind has in the past developed non-trivial approaches to the question of the meaning and purpose of the universe and life. The approaches by each of the great cultures have differed, but none of them has been trivial. That of modern Western civilization—which has now spread to form at least a major component of the approach of most of the world—is based upon the accumulated experience, insight and wisdom of the Judeo-Christian, Greco-Roman and European cultures. One generation after another has added, adapted, tested for error, reconciled theory with practice and practice with theory. The resulting structure may be complex; it may not be wholly consistent; it may not be fully adequate to today's world; but it is not trivial. From it does emerge a sense of direction, an aid to understanding, a sense of the beautiful and an insight into values transcending those of the individual, of class, of nation, of sect, or of generation—in other words a framework of reason, of aesthetics and of ethics.

The fourth point is that the human will can be effective only at the margin. Freedom is not absolute either for individuals or for nations. Much is determined by forces beyond our control, by events of the past which are irreversible, by accident or chance. At any given moment in time the margin of

freedom left us may seem so small as to make it hardly worthwhile to exercise our will one way or the other. But the narrow margin of today becomes the foundation of the broader possibility for tomorrow. Over time the margin of freedom—of the possible—expands geometrically. The decision of today makes possible, or forecloses, ten decisions of tomorrow.

Fifth, the accumulated wisdom and experience of the past do not always give unambiguous precedents for decisions and actions at the relevant margin of freedom of the present. A new integration of general purpose with the concrete possibilities of the present may then become necessary.

Sixth, changes in degree may, at some point, move so far as to become a change in kind. The most difficult issues of foreign policy and ethics arise where changes of degree become so great that they cross this boundary line and fundamental changes in past policy seem to be indicated.

Let us examine a currently important foreign policy issue in the context of the ideas suggested above. Are any of those ideas relevant and, if so, how and to what extent?

As an example, let us consider the circumstances, if any, under which the deployment and possible use of nuclear weapons might be justified.

Western civilization and its antecedent cultures have not taken the view that the precept of the Sixth Commandment was to be taken as an absolute. The values of achieving or maintaining freedom, diversity and cultural growth and of combatting tyranny, reaction and cultural stagnation or death have been generally considered to outweigh, at least under certain circumstances, the strong presumption against the taking of life. There has been much debate about the circumstances under which the important values are so threatened as to justify action involving the loss of life and much debate about what can be done to reduce the chances of such circumstances arising. But, except for absolute pacifists, the major point—that there may be such circumstances—has been agreed and has been the basis on which foreign policy has been conducted and judged from time immemorial.

There have been, from time to time, changes in the degree of destructiveness of weapons and of war. These changes have, up to now, generally been considered not to have invalidated the major point. But with the advent of nuclear weapons in volume, we are faced with a new issue. Has the change in degree now become one of kind? At the extreme of the possible it may very well have become such. The

release of the full potential for destruction of the nuclear weapons presently available in national stockpiles could amount to virtually total destruction.

Our consideration of an ethical framework suggests that the values, even the most important values, associated with any partial group of mankind, say the United States or the U.S.S.R. as nation-states, must be presumed not to be ultimate. A course of action likely to lead to general destruction cannot, therefore, be justified in support of those values.

That there are no conceivable circumstances under which the deployment and possible use of nuclear weapons would be justified does not, however, necessarily flow from the same premises.

The argument is made that the whole purpose of a policy of nuclear deterrence is to prevent nuclear weapons from being used. The thesis is that nuclear deterrence both makes possible the preservation of the values of freedom, diversity, and cultural growth and makes the general destruction of a nuclear war so unlikely as to make the risk tolerable.

Some would argue that no risk of so important a stake is tolerable. At a minimum it is clear that the risk must be reduced below its present magnitude. Can that be done? This is largely a question of fact rather than a question for ethical judgment! I believe it can, with great effort, be done—that by, say, 1965 we can so design and construct our nuclear defense system that no rational purpose could be served by the Soviet Union in initiating nuclear war and that, thereafter, little purpose would be served by either side in further accelerating the nuclear arms race. At such a time, if it has not earlier been possible, agreements on the control and regulation of armaments still further reducing the risk of nuclear war should, in my opinion, be possible.

An analysis of the reasons for the inherent instability in the current weapons confrontation between the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. and the technical considerations which lead to the belief that this inherent instability can be radically reduced over the next few years is not appropriate for inclusion in this essay. The point relevant to this analysis is that an assessment of the facts, of feasible possibilities, and of probable consequences of alternative courses of action are essential elements in judging any important issue of foreign policy and ethics.

But the even more important conclusion is that the meaningful analysis of foreign policy cannot even be begun unless we have some idea of an ethical framework from which the analysis can derive its relevance.