

THE POLITICS OF FEAR

The Possible Effects of Modern War Must Not Reduce Us to Inaction

Paul Ramsey

In his reply to Philip Toynbee's passionate plea that capitulation now would be better than mutual nuclear destruction, printed along with other essays in *The Fearful Choice*, the Most Reverend Geoffrey Fisher, Archbishop of Canterbury, stated that "for all I know it is within the providence of God that the human race should destroy itself in this manner. There is no evidence that the human race is to last for ever and plenty of Scripture to the contrary effect."

This apparently unfeeling statement produced such a minor uproar that the Archbishop attempted an explanation. Apart from invoking a dubious and characteristic Anglican distinction between the foreknowledge of God and his pre-determination of such an event, Dr. Fisher wrote: "As Mr. Toynbee brought the human race in more than once, I thought it well to suggest in a sentence or two that fear for the human race was no ground on which to base policy." This was to say in effect: "You need not trouble yourself as to whether or when or how the human race will come to an end. There is no evidence that it will last forever. There is reason for thinking that it will come to an end. Neither you nor I can tell whether in the providence of God it will end by the effects of nuclear war or by some other means or not at all. So don't base your policies on fears about the extinction of the human race."

In one way, Dr. Fisher's reply was to the point. If the "end of the world," or human history as we know it, twenty-four hours from now has the power to render meaningless all human action up to that point, so does the end that will come two billion years from now by the world's energy petering out or by some cosmic collision. The possibility of total nuclear destruction, by shortening the time during which this planet may still be inhabited or fit for human habitation, has only strengthened or excited the imagination and made it possible, indeed necessary, to conceive of an ending of the whole human story. But it has not made it a bit more certain.

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This was of itself conceivable before, indeed known to be bound to happen.

People who before were not able to draw correct inferences from this fact should not now be advised to do so simply by the heightened power their imaginations have received. If there was no point in cherishing a friendship or reading Plato or the Bible while roasting the last potato over the last dying ember of a universe run-down, and therefore no point in all the efforts and experiences that went before, there is of course no point now in any of the things we do or feel or know that is not fundamentally threatened by nuclear destruction, and all policy has despairingly to be determined in sole reference to dread of the end.

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But we should have had sufficient intellectual powers to have known this all along, since philosophers of enlightened one-world views of human destiny began systematically to darken the human horizon of all reference to transcendence. What, for example, are we to make of Hannah Arendt's statement, published several years ago in *The Commonweal*, that with the appearance of atomic weapons appeals to courage itself have become meaningless: "Man can be courageous only so long as he knows he is survived by those who are like him, that he fulfills a role in something more permanent than himself . . . Or to put it another way, while there certainly are conditions under which individual life is not worth having, the same cannot be true for mankind. The moment war can even conceivably threaten the continued existence of mankind on earth, the alternative between liberty and death has lost its old plausibility."

To find a man's final end in mankind, and mankind's final end in the continued existence of mankind, was all along to find his final end seriously threatened by his certain physical end. How long away in time the end may be makes no essential difference. If my courage and devotion find their justification only in reference to those who survive who are like me, and this is the meaning of my role

in relation to something more permanent than myself, then I must ask how permanent are they, and so on through the generations until we come to the last man with that last potato, only to discover that the last link in the chain on which the whole meaning of my existence depended is grounded in nothing.

What has happened today is that absentmindedness about this has now been shocked into taking thought. The answer to this is to say that no such view was ever true or was ever the meaning of Christian eschatology. Yet Archbishop Fisher's reply was not sufficiently to the point; for the new issue raised by modern weaponry is not simply the vivid presentation to our imaginations, heightened by foreshortening the time, of the possibility that an end *will* come, but instead the possibility that this may take place *by human action*. This is an issue of policy, and it is a problem for morality.

In considering this question, we must make a further distinction between the great *evil* of all-out war and the *risk* of such a war, and between the *evil* of destroying mankind by human action and the *danger* that this may happen. This distinction has not often been clearly made by those who simply affirm that there can be "no greater evil" than nuclear warfare or that there can be "no greater evil" than man's destruction of mankind. This may be true, yet there may still be greater evils than *risking* war or than *risking* enormously large scale destruction; and in any case decisions have today to be made in the light of these enduring dangers without, as such, choosing all-out war or such destruction as a lesser evil to any other alternative.

Among the opening sections of the Provisional Study Document on modern war prepared for the World Council of Churches is this statement: "It is part of our Christian hope that all men may experience God's victory as mercy as well as judgment, and we may therefore never consent to the prospect of terminating human history by human act." This conclusion is clearly a *non sequitur* where it stands; or else in the premise of the statement God's mercy and judgment have been reduced wholly to the plane of future human history on this planet. That was never the Christian hope, nor Christian eschatology.

The curious expression, "never consent to the prospect of terminating human history by human act" also needs to be clarified. In one sense, this is a "prospect" no one asks us to "consent" to, but to accept as among the possibilities intrinsic to man's knowledge of the created world. To consent or not to consent to this prospect is not a matter of human

choice; nor could this have been the meaning of the statement in a document which also recognizes that, because the bomb is now an indestructible possession of mankind, the prospect of its use will always be present. "Never consent to the prospect" can only mean "never consent to the adoption of a policy or a military action whose consequence would probably or likely terminate human history by human action."

This statement in turn is greatly in need of clarification, for a whole range of meanings and possible actions are contained within the, as yet unspecified, degree of possibility, probability or likelihood of this consequence of a particular human action. Without saying more, one cannot tell what actions are prohibited on this principle. By failing to distinguish between the evil of all-out nuclear destruction and the evil of *risking* such destruction which the policies of nations may have to endure or consent to, or rather by allowing the gravity of the evil of nuclear destruction to become confused with the gravity of the evil even in the slightest risk of it, many people today are inclined to say that to consent to policies that involve any risk whatsoever of nuclear destruction is the same as to consent to the extermination of the human race by human action. They say, with Hannah Arendt, that "the moment war can even conceivably threaten the continued existence of mankind on earth," all justification for warfare vanishes, because the alternative between choosing liberty or choosing death has vanished.

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But has it? To choose liberty by means that could conceivably threaten the existence of mankind, to choose liberty by means that might lead to destruction, is not yet the same as choosing death. What we have to compare is the evil of capitulation with the evil involved in risking war, or the evil to be repelled by war with the risk of nuclear war, or the evil sought to be repelled in warfare by means of conventional weapons with the risk that more powerful weapons will be used, or the concentrated power of evil that would have to be repelled by the use of limited atomic weapons with the risk that strategic weapons will be used. In no case would we be choosing war; or, by choosing war, choosing nuclear war or choosing megathon weapons, or choosing to terminate the human race by human action.

If the causal connection between these steps, or the necessary connection between risking war and war itself, is so great as to abolish the distinction between the whatever degree of danger there is

of so great an evil and the evil itself, this has to be shown. It cannot simply be asserted. It may be that there is now "no greater evil" than modern war. At the same time, it may be that there are still many greater evils than the rather permanent danger of war which it is the destiny of men to endure in any age, or greater evils than the present danger we face in the degree of likelihood that our actions will lead to, rather than prevent, the destructiveness of modern warfare.

I am not now asking whether there can be any greater evil than our all-out use of megathon weapons, or any greater evil than an act of indiscriminate bombing. To my satisfaction that question has already been answered and the moral limit to warfare fixed. We should in that connection be resolved to make the affirmation of Socrates in the *Gorgias* that it is better to suffer evil than to do it. The question now is whether, in mounting a defense proportionate to an attack, i.e., against the attack itself and not directly against a people as a whole, there is sufficient prudential reason for attempting to disengage ourselves from all use of armed force, or any form of warfare, to be found in the fact that there is danger of starting nuclear destructiveness and even of terminating the human race by human action.

Of course, it may be pointed out that if war is limited or just, if even one side disciplines itself to restrain the use it is willing to make of the weapons mankind now possesses, that in itself will limit the destructiveness of any future war and forestall the prospect of nuclear doom. But the question now posed is whether (independent of the limitation of killing to the indirect, even if vast, effect of tactical bombing), and in what sense, dread of destroying the human race by human action should provide the ground, in a prudent calculation of the consequences alone, for the conclusion that all modern war is morally prohibited, because there can be no greater evil than this, and certainly no commensurate good to justify it.

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There is much to be commended in the exactness with which Catholic moral theologians address themselves to this issue. When they say that under no circumstances would it ever be right to "permit" the termination of the human race by human action, because there could not possibly be any proportionate grave reason to justify such a thing, they know exactly what they mean. Of course, in prudential calculation, in balancing the good directly in-

tended and done against the evil unintended and indirectly done, no greater precision can be forthcoming than the subject allows; yet it seems clear that there can be no good sufficiently great, or evil repelled sufficiently grave, to warrant the destruction of mankind by man's own action.

I mean, however, that the moral theologian knows what he means by "permit." He is not talking in the main about probabilities, risks and dangers in general. He is talking about an action which just as efficaciously does an evil thing (and is known certainly and unavoidably to lead to this evil result) as it efficaciously does some good. He is talking about double effects, of which the specific action causes directly the one and indirectly the other, but *causes* both; of which one is consciously intended and the other not intended or not directly intended, but still both are *done*, and the evil effect is, with equal consciousness on the part of the agent, foreknown to be a consequence.

This is what, in a technical sense, to "only permit" an evil result means. It means to do it and to know one is doing it, but as only a secondary if certain effect of the good one primarily does and intends. Of course, grave guiltiness may be imputed to the military action of any nation, or to the action of any leader or leaders, which for any supposed good "permits," in this sense, the termination of the human race by human action. Certainly, in analyzing an action which truly faced such alternatives, it is, as *Worldview* stated in its May, 1958 editorial, "never possible than no world would be preferable to some worlds, and there are in truth no circumstances in which the destruction of human life presents itself as a reasonable alternative."

Naturally, where one or the other of the effects of an action are uncertain, this has to be taken into account. Especially is this true when, because the good effect is remote and speculative while the evil is certain and grave, the action is prohibited. Presumably, if the reverse is the case and the good effect is more certain than the evil result that will be forthcoming, not only must the good and the evil be prudentially weighed and found proportionate, but also calculation of the probabilities and of the degree of certainty or uncertainty in the good or evil effect must be taken into account. There must not only be greater good than evil objectively in view, but also greater probability of actually doing more good than harm. If an evil which is certain and extensive and immediate may rarely be compensated for by a problematic, speculative, future good, by the same token not every present, certain

and immediate good (or lesser evil) that may have to be done will be outweighed by a problematic, speculative and future evil.

Nevertheless, according to the traditional theory, a man begins in the midst of action and he analyzes its nature and immediate consequences before or while putting it forth and causing those consequences. He does not expect to be able to trammel up all the future consequences of an action. Above all, he does not debate mere contingencies, and therefore, if these are possibly dreadful, find himself forced into inaction. He does what he can and may and must, without regarding himself as lord of the future or, on the other hand, as covered with guilt by accident or unforeseen consequences.

By contrast, a good deal of nuclear pacifism begins with the contingencies and the probabilities, and not with the moral nature of the action to be done; and by deriving legitimate decision backward from whatever may conceivably or possibly or probably result, whether by anyone's doing or by accident, it finds itself driven to inaction, to non-political action in politics and non-military action in military affairs, and to the not very surprising discovery that there are now no distinctions on which the defense of justice can possibly be based.

For example, in *The Fearful Choice* Philip Toynbee writes that "in terms of probability it is surely as likely as not that mutual fear will lead to accidental war in the near future if the present situation continues. If it continues indefinitely it is nearly a statistical certainty that a mistake will be made and that the devastation will begin."

Against such a termination of human life on earth by human action, he then proposes as an alternative that we "negotiate at once with the Russians and get the best terms which are available," that we deliberately "negotiate from comparative weakness." He bravely attempts to face this alterna-

tive realistically, i.e., by considering the worst possible outcome, namely, the total domination of the world by Russia within a few years. This, he thinks, would be by far the better choice, when "it is a question of allowing the human race to survive, possibly under the domination of a regime which most of us detest, or of allowing it to destroy itself in appalling and prolonged anguish."

Nevertheless, the consequence of the policy proposed is everywhere subtly qualified: it is "a possible result, however improbable;" "the worst, and least probable" result; "if it didn't prevail mankind would still be given the opportunity of prevailing;" for "surely anything is better than a policy which allows for the possibility of nuclear war." If we haven't thought and made a decision entirely in these terms, then we need to submit ourselves to the following "simple test": "Have we decided how we are to kill the other members of our household in the event of our being less injured than they are?"

Thus, in the thinking of many of the nuclear pacifists, moral decision must be entirely deduced backward from the likely eventuality; it is no longer to be formulated in terms of the nature of present action itself, its intention, and proximate effect or the thing to be done.

But in general, all the life-acts of men or of nations put forth in the present and reaching toward the future have this character: that from them all flow multiple effects. With the destroyer commander, "one must do what one must, and say one's prayers;" or rather, one may do what one must with confidence and gladness because one can and will and must say one's prayers. That is to say, because as a Christian one never thought to find among these future contingencies any self-guaranteeing ground for action, nor in his physical end man's final end, individually or collectively. Man's thrust onward need not become paralyzed, because he is not set *only* along an interminable road.

3

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