In the March 19 issue of America, Father John Courtney Murray, S.J., professor of dogmatic theology at Woodstock College and editor of the quarterly Theological Studies, published a critique of what he called the current "ambiguous" approach to problems of ethics and foreign policy. He followed this in America's March 26 issue with a statement of his own position. Because of their special relevance to its own concerns, Worldview, with the permission of America, has here adapted Father Murray's two articles for publication as one essay. A section of comments on "Morality and Foreign Policy" will appear in the June issue of Worldview.

During the decade of the Tentative 'Fifties the course of events has thrust a number of basic issues into the forum of public argument. One of them goes under the rubric, "morality and public policy." Chiefly in question is foreign policy.

My introduction to the state of the problem took place at the outset of the decade in a conversation with a distinguished journalist who is now dead. In public affairs he was immensely knowledgeable; he was also greatly puzzled over the new issue that was being raised. His first question revealed the source of his puzzlement. What, he asked, has the Sermon on the Mount got to do with foreign policy? I was not a little taken aback by this statement on the issue. What makes you think that morality is identical with the Sermon on the Mount? And in effect was the end of the conversation. We floundered a while in the shallows and miseries of mutual misunderstanding, and then changed the subject to the tactics of the war going on in Korea.

The Old Morality Passes

I have only a fragmentary acquaintance with the growing body of literature on morality and foreign policy; the subject is outside my field. But listening, as it were, on the edges of the public argument, I have come to the conclusion that my journalist friend properly introduced me to the fundamental problem. It does not lie in the concept of policy, or even in the concreteness of actual policies, though these matters are complex enough. It lies in the concept of morality itself. Rarely does the argument get to concrete issues of policy. And even when it does, the talk quickly turns back to the root of confusion—the question: what is morality?

The reasons for this fact lie in the history of moral theory in America. But that story is long, not to be told here (I don't think it ever has been fully told). An important event, of relatively recent occurrence, has been the recognition of the shortcomings and falsities of an older American morality that dominated the 19th century and still held sway into the 20th.

Its style was voluntarist; it sought the constitution of the moral order in the will of God. The good is good because God commands it; the evil is evil because God forbids it. The notion that certain acts are intrinsically evil or good, and therefore forbidden or commanded by God, was rejected. Rejected too was the older intellectualist tradition of ethics and its equation of morality with right reason. Reason is the dupe of interest and passion. And how is one to know, or dare to say, whose reason is right? In the search for moral principles and solutions reason can have no place.

In its sources the older morality was scriptural in a fundamentalist sense. In order to find the will of God for man it went directly to the Bible. There alone the divine precepts and prohibitions are stated. They are stated in so many words, and the words are to be taken at their immediate face value without further exegetical ado. When, for instance, the Gospel tells the Christian not to resist evil but to turn the other cheek, the precept is clear and absolute. The true Christian abdicates the use of force even in the face of injury.

In its mood the old morality was subjectivist. Technically it would be called a "morality of intention." It set primary and controlling value on a sincerity of interior motive; what matters is not what you do but why you do it. And it was strong on the point that an act is moral only when its motive
is altruistic—concretely, when the motive is love. If any element of self-interest creeps in, the act is corrupt and sinful.

Finally, in its whole spirit the old morality was individualistic. Not only did it reject the idea of a moral authority external to the individual conscience. It also set its single focus on the individual existence and on the moral problems that arise in interpersonal relationships. As for society, it believed in a direct transference of personal values into social life; in principle it would tolerate nothing less than Christian perfection as a social standard. Its highest assertion was there would be no moral problems in society, if only all men loved the neighbor.

Within the last generation this older morality has come under severe criticism, in itself and its later historical alliance with certain trends in secular liberal thought. The attack has centered on its simplism. The discovery was made that this morality of facile absolutes was ill-suited to cope with the growing complexity of an industrial society, domestically and in its foreign relations.

It did not go beyond the false notion that society is simply the sum of the individuals living in it, and that public morality is no more than the sum of private moralities. It did not understand the special moral problems raised by the institutionalization of human action. It did not grasp the nature of politics, the due autonomy of the political, the limiting factors of political action, or the standing of success as a political value. It had no sense of the differential character of morality and legality, no theory of jurisprudence, no idea of the distinction between private sin and public crime (witness the laws that it has left on the statute books—notably the Connecticut birth control statute).

In consequence of all these shortcomings, the older morality possessed no resources for discriminating moral judgment. It tended to thrust its simple yeas and nays upon political, social and economic reality without any careful prior analysis of the realities in question. It disregarded the duly autonomous character of their lines and life. It distorted the meaning of Plato's famous dictum and understood it to say that society is the individual (not "man") writ large. In a word, what the older morality failed to understand was the nature of man himself.

**Ethic for a New World**

The critique of the older American morality seems to have been not only just but also successful. The older morality, though still around, is no longer dominant. This is good. It is perhaps particularly good that the older morality is still around. Doubtless it is useless against the demons that inhabit the organized structures of society and exert their sway over history from these seats of institutionalized power. On the other hand, it had a certain virtue of exorcism against the demons that dwell in the life of the individual. And it is always good that at least some demons are cast out from among us even though their departure still leaves us in combat with the "rulers of this world of darkness," whose dominion will endure until the Day of the Lord.

The avowed purpose of the newer American morality is to reckon with the full complexity of man's nature and of human affairs. Hence against the absolutism of the old morality, in which the contingent facts got lost under insistence on the absolute precept, the new morality moves towards a situationism, in which the absoluteness of principle tends to get lost amid the contingencies of fact. Against the abstract fundamentalist literalism of the old morality the new system is consciously pragmatist; not the wording of the precept but a calculus of the consequences of the act is the decisive moral norm. Whereas the old morality saw things so simple that moral judgment was always easy, the new morality sees things as so complicated that moral judgment becomes practically impossible. The final category of moral judgment is not "right" or "wrong"—but "ambiguous."

Finally, against the self-righteous tendency of the old morality, the new theory teaches that to act is to sin, to accept responsibility is to incur guilt, to live at all is to stand under the judgment of God, which is uniformly adverse, since every act of moral judgment is vitiated by some hidden fallacy, and every use of human freedom is inevitably an exercise in pride.

The current argument about morality and foreign policy goes on within the climate of moral opinion created at once by the older American morality, and by the newer morality, and by the conflict between them—a conflict which does not rule out certain similarities, notably their common rejection of the whole style and structure of natural-law morality. Three basic problems, each related to the others, furnish the focus of concern.

**Three Related Problems**

The first is the gulf between individual and collective morality. Since the day of Roger Williams and his separation of the "garden" (the Christian community) and the "wilderness" (society or "the world"), prevalent American moral theory has never found a way to bridge the chasm between the order of private life and the order of law, public policy and institutional action, especially when the question concerns the nation-state. The private life is governed by the will of God as stated in the Scriptures; it is to bear the stamp of the Christian values canonized by the Scriptures—patience, gentleness, sacrifice, forbearance, trust, compassion, humility,
On the other hand, it is the plainest of historical facts that the public life of the nation-state is not governed by these values. Hardly less plain is the fact that it cannot be. What, asked my journalist friend quite sensibly, has the Sermon on the Mount got to do with foreign policy? Pacifism, for instance, may be a dictate of the individual conscience, but it cannot be a public policy. What then is the will of God for the nation-state? How and where is it to be discovered? There is no charter of political morality in the Scriptures. Must one, therefore, admit that all politics is simply Realpolitik—the selfish pursuit of national interest in a nicely calculated play of power to which ethical norms are irrelevant? The other two questions are consequent. First, is it not the historical fact that the nation-state acknowledges only one imperative, the dictate of national interest? And is not the fact itself also normative? Is it not right that the nation should act? Would it not be wrong for the nation to act apart from the national interest, short of it, or beyond it? But if you hold this, do you not come into open conflict with the basic tenet of both the older and the new American morality, which is that self-concern is the primal sin! that the pursuit of self-interest is the pursuit of evil? that the whole function of Christian morality is to call self-interest into question, deny it all theoretical justification, and condemn it in practice? This is the moral theory. Strictly applied, it must assert that the nation is sinful and guilty in all its actions, since they are never free of the taint of interest.

Faithfully held, this theory requires that the nation should be called upon to transcend self-interest, resist its dictates, and act beyond them in a spirit of disinterested altruism. Or, since this moral call would have the ring of nonsense in the field of politics, and since morality is not supposed to sound like nonsense, one could choose not to hold and apply the theory strictly. One could fall back on the position that self-interest is a legitimate motive for the individual. Then the question is, in the name of what theory do you make this distinction? Is this to bridge the gulf between private and collective morality, or simply to fall headlong into it?

The final issue is perhaps the most basic. It certainly is the most inclusive, since it spans all the prominent issues of the day—armaments, the politics of the Cold War, the economics and politics of the revolution of rising expectations. It is the issue of power. As far as the sheer fact goes, most Americans seem to have finally awakened to the central relationship between foreign policy and force. But the awakening was to a state of moral bafflement and anxiety, insofar as it took place in the climate of moral opinion described above.

In the climate of this moral opinion a cold breath of evil more than faintly emanates from the very words "power" and "force." It seems to have been part of the American dream that this nation could go through history with clean hands by the simple Kantian expedient described in Peggy's genial phrase: "Kantianism has clean hands, because it has no hands." Concretely, a nation's "hands," where-with it shapes the stuff of history, are its instruments of power—military, economic and diplomatic power, together with the power of sheer presence and prestige. We have never wanted to have such hands, much less to get them dirty by handling any history save our own. Our historic declaration was that power-struggles were for the "barbarous" nations of Europe, not for us. Now we have become suddenly conscious of our hands—that they are sinewy beyond comparison; that they are sunk in the affairs of the world; that they are getting dirty beyond the wrists.

At least we feel them to be dirty, and the feeling is one of guilt. The United States today is an imperialism, like it or not. And we like it so little that we are even unwilling to admit the fact. The cause of our anxiety is not that there has been little in our past political experience to teach us wisely to wield the instrument of empire, which is power. It is rather that there is nothing in current American moral theories to teach us the moral quality of power itself. The prevalent teaching is simply that power is evil. The teaching, in fact, is that the evil in human nature is precisely a will to power. The will is activated as the hand closes on the thing; at that moment innocence is lost, never to be regained. To be human is bad enough; but to be powerful is to be corrupt, with a corruption that increases with each increment of power.

In what moral terms, therefore, is America to justify itself in its possession of power? And in what terms is America to justify itself to the world for its uses of its power? Can these hands be cleansed? Or must the scriptural phrase be inverted to read: I let him who is unjustified become still more unjust? The national straits are even more narrowed when one considers that the teaching says one further devastating thing. It says that to refuse to use power is to be "irresponsible," and therefore to be more guilty yet.

One Thing Comes Clear

These seem to be the basic issues involved in the current controversy about morality and foreign policy. I have found myself in a fog as I have listened intermittently, while cynics dispute with moralists, and political realists dispute with ethical idealists, and fundamentalists dispute with "ambiguists" (I apologize for the barbarism, but I must have a de-
scriptive term for this school of thought, whose favorite word is "ambiguity").

Only one thing is clear. The real issue does not concern the moral quality of this or that element of American foreign policy. The real issue concerns the nature of morality itself, the determinants of moral action (whether individual or collective), the structure of the moral act, and the general shle of moral action. One cannot argue moral issues until they are stated; but what are the terms of statement of the moral issues involved in foreign policy? One cannot come to practical solutions until one has first formulated the relevant principles and also analyzed the factual situation in which the principled solution is to be practiced; but by what methods do you arrive at your principles and establish their relevance, and what is your analysis of the factual situation? As these issues are touched, or as they are avoided, the whole argument flies off in all directions.

The proper bafflers are the ambiguists. Their flashes of insight are frequent enough; but in the end the fog closes down. They are great ones for the facts, against the fundamentalists, and great ones for "consent," against the cynics. They insist on the values of pragmatism against the absolutists; but they resent the suggestion that they push pragmatism to the point of a relativism of moral values. My main difficulty, however, is that I never know what, in their argument, is fact and what is moral category (surely there is a difference), or where the process of history ends and the moral order begins (surely there must be such a point).

When they undertake to describe the historical-political situation for which policy is to be framed, one has the same feeling that comes on seeing a play by Sartre. No human characters are on the stage, only Sartre's philosophical categories. So, in the ambiguist descriptions, the factual situation always appears as a "predicament," full of "ironies," sown with "dilemmas," to be stated only in "paradox," to be dealt with only at one's "hazard," because in the situation "creative and destructive possibilities" are inextricably mixed, and therefore policy and action of whatever kind can only be "morally ambiguous."

Morality Based on a Parti Pris

But this is to filter the facts through categories. So far as one can see by an independent look "out there," the dilemmas and ironies and paradoxes are, like the beauty of the beloved, in the eye of the ambiguist beholder. They represent a doctrinaire construction of the facts in terms of an antecedent moral theory. And every set of facts is constructed in such a way as to make the moral verdict "ambiguous" a foregone conclusion.

The ambiguist rightly puts emphasis on the complexity of the situations with which foreign policy has to deal: no one could exaggerate the complexity hidden under the phrase, "the Cold War." But does the fact of complexity justify the vocabulary of description or the monotonous moral verdict? It is as if a surgeon in the midst of a gastroenterostomy were to say that the highly complex situation in front of him is so full of paradox ("The patient is at once receiving blood and losing it"), and irony ("Half a stomach will be better than a whole one") and dilemmas ("Not too much, not too little, anesthesia") that all surgical solutions are necessarily ambiguous. Complicated situations, surgical or moral, are merely complicated. It is for the statesman, as for the surgeon, to master the complications and minister as best he can to the health of the body, political or physical. The work may be done deftly or clumsily, intelligently or stupidly, with variant degrees of success or failure; but why call it in either case "ambiguous?" The philosophers of moral ambiguity will, of course, say that the ambiguity, properly speaking, is not in the political situation but in political man, who carries into politics the paradox, irony and ambiguous amalgam of virtue and corruption that reside in his own nature (or in the human "self," as the ambiguists prefer to say, since they have a peculiar meaning all their own for the word "nature"). There you have it.

In point of sheer method there is no reason why the ambiguist should not make use of a conceptual scheme to guide his analysis of political fact, and to furnish the terms of his statement of moral issues, and to determine the style of his argument in favor of his solutions. Every moralist does this. Every moralist has his concept of the moral order. All practical moral inquiry has theoretical presuppositions. Each moral theory has its own categories of statement and its own style of argument. And in the end every structure of moral doctrine and decision rests on a concept of the nature of man.

To this concept of man's nature the critical argument comes back. The ambiguist indicts the fundamentalist and the secular liberal for their one-dimensional views of man. But he does not recognize that the same indictment recoils on his own head. He easily disposes of all the utopianisms, both "hard" and "soft," that result from the one-dimensional fundamentalist and secular liberal views. He then spins an enormously complex analysis of the "real" nature of man in personal and political life. And at the end of it (this is the real paradox) he has again compressed the moral life of man into one dimension. Inescapably, beyond all help of divine grace—and even further beyond all help from human reason and freedom—the life of man, personally and politically, is lived in the single moral dimension of ambiguity. He who relishes irony should relish this
that the whole complicated argument against simplistic theories should result in the creation of a theory that is itself simplistic; that the smashing attack on the bright and brittle illusion of utopianism should win its victory under the banner of an opposite illusion that is marshy and murky but no less an illusion.

I have outlined the argument about morality and foreign policy in a way to suggest that it is an intramural argument within the Protestant community. So it is. The question I have asked myself is, whether and on what terms it might be possible for me to enter the argument.

Pseudo-problems

My own terms of moral definition, argument and judgment are, of course, those of the tradition of reason in moral affairs—the ancient tradition that has been sustained and developed in the Catholic Church. Consequently, listening to the public argument on morality and foreign policy, I have found it difficult to discover just what all the shooting is about. Three major issues have come to the fore. The trouble is that all these seem to me factitious. From where I sit, so to speak, in the moral universe, they are all pseudo-problems. Were I to enter the argument, this is the first point I should have to make.

The Protestant moralist is disturbed by the gulf between the morality of individual and collective man. He is forever trying somehow to close the gap. Forever he fails, not only in doing this but even in seeing how it could possibly be done. Thus he is driven back upon the simplest category of “ambiguity.” Or he sadly admits an irresolvable dichotomy between moral man and immoral society.

I am obliged to say that the whole practical problem is falsely conceived in consequence of a defective theory. No such pseudo-problem arises within the tradition of reason—or, if you will, in the ethic of natural law. Society and the state are understood to be natural institutions with their own relatively autonomous ends or purposes, which are pre-designed in broad outline in the social and political nature of man, as understood in its concrete completeness through reflection and historical experience. These purposes are public, not private. They are therefore strictly limited. They do not transcend the temporal and terrestrial order, within which the political and social life of man is confined; and even within this order they are not coextensive with the ends of the human person as such. The obligatory public purposes of society and the state impose on these institutions a special set of obligations which, again by nature, are not coextensive with the wider and higher range of obligations that rest upon the human person (not to speak of the Christian). In a word, the imperatives of political and social morality derive from the inherent order of political and social reality itself, as the architectonic moral reason conceives this necessary order in the light of the fivefold structure of obligatory political ends—justice, freedom, security, the general welfare, and civil unity or peace (so the Preamble to the American Constitution states these ends).

It follows, then, that the morality proper to the life and action of society and the state is not univocally the morality of personal life, or even of familial life. Therefore the effort to bring the organized action of politics and the practical art of statecraft directly under the control of the Christian values that govern personal and familial life is inherently fallacious. It makes wreckage not only of public policy but also of morality itself.

Again, the Protestant moralist is deeply troubled by the fact that nations and states have the incorrigible habit of acting in their own self-interest, and thus violating the fundamental canon of morality which sees in self-concern the basic sin. Here again is a pseudo-problem. I am, of course, much troubled by the question of the national interest, but chiefly lest it be falsely identified in the concrete, thus giving rise to politically stupid policies. But since I do not subscribe to a Kantian “morality of intention,” I am not at all troubled by the centrality of self-interest as the motive of national action. From the point of view of political morality, as determined by the purposes inherent in the state, this motive is both legitimate and necessary.

There is, however, one reservation. I do not want self-interest interpreted in the sense of the classic theory of raison d’état, which was linked to the modern concept of the absolute sovereignty of the nation-state. This latter concept imparted to the notion of national self-interest an absoluteness that was always as illegitimate as it is presently outworn. The tradition of reason requires, with particular stringency today, that national interest, remaining always valid and omnipresent as a motive, be given only a relative and proximate status as an end of national action. Political action stands always under the imperative to realize, at least in some minimal human measure, the fivefold structure of obligatory political ends. Political action by the nation-state projected in the form of foreign policy today stands with historical clarity (as it always stood with theoretical clarity in the tradition of reason) under the imperative to realize this structure of political ends in the international community, within the limits—narrow but real—of the possible. Today, in fact as in theory, the national interest must be related to this international realization, which stands higher and more ultimate in political value than itself.

No false theoretical dichotomy may be thrust in here. The national interest, rightly understood, is
successfully achieved only at the interior, as it were, of the growing international order to which the pursuit of national interest can and must contribute. There is, of course, the practical problem of defining the concrete policies that will be successful at once in the national interest and in the higher interest of international order. The casuistry is endlessly difficult. In any case, one ought to spare oneself unnecessary theoretical agonies, whose roots are often in sentimentalism; as, for instance, the effort to justify foreign aid in terms of pure disinterested Christian charity. To erect some sort of inevitable opposition between the pursuit of national interest and the true imperatives of political morality is to create a pseudo-problem.

**Power and Politics**

The third source of Protestant moral anxiety is the problem of power. The practical problem, as put to policy, is enormously complicated in the nuclear age, in the midst of a profound historical crisis of civilization, and over against an ideology of force that is also a spreading political imperialism. This, however, is surely no reason for distorting the problem by thrusting into it a set of theoretically false dilemmas—by saying, for instance, that to use power is praiseworthy and therefore bad, and not to use it is irresponsible and therefore worse. The tradition of reason declines all such reckless simplification. It rejects the cynical dictum of Lenin that "the state is a club." On the other hand, it does not attempt to fashion the state in the image of an Eastern-seaboard "liberal" who at once abhors power and adores it (since by him, emergent from the matrix of American Protestant culture, power is unconsciously regarded as satanic). The traditional ethic starts with the assumption that, as there is no law without force to vindicate it, there is no politics without power to promote it. All politics is power politics—up to a point.

The point is set by multiple criteria. To be drastically brief, the essential criterion is the distinction between force and violence. Force is the measure of power necessary and sufficient to uphold the valid purposes both of law and of politics. What exceeds this measure is violence, which destroys the order of both of law and of politics. The distinction is teleological, in the customary style of the tradition of reason. As an instrument, force is morally neutral in itself. The standard of its use is aptitude or ineptitude for the achievement of the obligatory public purposes. Here again the casuistry is endlessly difficult, especially when the moralist's refusal to sanction too much force clashes with the soldier's classic reluctance to use too little force. In any case, the theory is clear enough. The same criterion which governs the state in its use of coercive law for the public purposes also governs the state in its use of force, again for the public purposes. The function of law, said the Jurist, is to be useful to the community; this too is the function of force.

The community, as the Jurist knew, is neither a choir of angels nor a pack of wolves. It is simply the human community which, in proportion as it is civilized, strives to maintain itself in some small margin of safe distance from the chaos of barbarism. For this effort the only resources directly available to the community are those which first rescued it from barbarism, namely, the resources of reason, made operative chiefly through the processes of reasonable law, prudent public policies, and a discriminatingly apt use of force.

(Note here that Christianity profoundly altered the structure of politics by introducing the revolutionary idea of the two communities, two orders of law and two authorities; but it did not change the nature of politics, law and government, which still remain rational processes; to the quality of these processes Christian faith and grace contribute only indirectly, by their inner effect upon man himself, which is in part the correction and clarification of the processes of reason.)

The necessary defense against barbarism is, therefore, an apparatus of state that embodies both reason and force in a measure that is at least decently conformable with what man has learned, by rational reflection and historical experience, to be necessary and useful to sustain his striving towards the life of civility. The historical success of the civilized community in this continuing effort of the forces of reason to hold at bay the counterforces of barbarism is no more than marginal. The traditional ethic, which asserts the doctrine of the rule of reason in public affairs, does not expect that man's historical success in installing reason in its rightful rule will be much more than marginal. But the margin makes the difference.

All this is the sort of thing that the theorist of natural law would have first to say were he to enter on the ground floor, so to speak, of the controversy about morality and public policy. He could not possibly argue concrete problems of policy in the moral terms of the ambiguist. Insofar as these terms are intelligible to him at all, they seem to him questionable in themselves and creative of pseudo-problems in the field of policy. In turn, the Protestant moralist, whatever his school, cannot possibly argue questions of policy in the moral terms of the tradition of reason. The tradition is alien to him at every point—in its intellectualism, its theological emphasis, its insistence on the analogical character of the structures of life (personal, familial, political, social), its assignment of primacy to the objective end of the act over the subjective intention of the agent, and its casuistical niceties. At best, the whole theory is
unintelligible; at worst it is an idolatry of reason and an evacuation of the Gospel.

It has also become customary to point out that, whatever the merits of the tradition, it is dead, in the sense of Nietzsche's dictum, "God is dead." So I was told recently. It happened that I wrote a little piece on the traditional moral doctrine on the limitations of warfare, as fashioned by the tradition of reason [Worldview, Dec. 1958]. A friendly critic, Prof. Julian Hartt of the Yale Divinity School, had this to say: "Father Murray has not, I believe, clearly come to terms with the question behind every serious consideration of limited war as a moral option, i.e., where are the ethical principles to fix the appropriate limits? Where, not what: can we make out the lineaments of the community which is the living repository (as it were) of the ethical principles relevant and efficacious to the moral determinations of the limits of warfare?" [Worldview, April 1959]. This is a fair question.

After a look around the national lot, Professor Hartt comes to the conclusion that the American community does not qualify; it is not the living repository of what the tradition of reason has said on warfare. I am compelled regretfully to agree that he is right. Such is the fact. I would further say that the American community, especially in its "clerks," who are the custodians of the public philosophy, is not the repository of the tradition of reason on any moral issue you would like to name. This ancient tradition—like the Eternal Reason of God, to which it makes its initial and final appeal—is dead.

(It lives, if you will, within the Catholic community; but this community fails to bring it into vital relation with the problems of foreign policy; there seems, in fact, to be some reason for saying that the Catholic community is not much interested in foreign affairs, beyond its contribution in sustaining the domestic mood of anti-Communism.)

But if it be the fact that the tradition of natural law, once vigorous in America, is now dead, a serious question arises. What then is the moral doctrine on which America bases its national action, especially its foreign policy?

"Don't Shoot First"

One could put the question in the first instance to the Government. It is clear that the Department of Defense and its allied agencies find sufficient moral warrant for their policies in their loyalty to the good old Western-story maxim: "Don't shoot first."

With the moral issue thus summarily disposed of, they set policy under the primatial control of that powerful dyarchy, technology and the budget, which conspire to accumulate weapons that, from the moral point of view, are unshootable, no matter who shoots first. Those who are disquieted by this situation—which is not ambiguous but simply wrong—are invited to find comfort in the emanations of crypto-pacifism from the White House, which seems to hold that we shall never shoot at all. The moral argument for this unambiguous position, whose simplism rivals that of the ambigusists, is never made clear.

The inquiry into the moral bases of policy would likely produce other weird and wonderful answers, if elsewhere pursued—within the Department of State, for instance, with regard to disarmament, foreign aid and diplomatic démarche among the uncommited or emergent nations.

In any case, the question is perhaps more appropriately put to the American community at large. The theory of American government seems to be that public policies borrow, as it were, their morality from the conscience of the people. Right policies, as well as due powers, derive from the consent of the governed. Therefore, on what structured concept of the moral order does the American people undertake to fulfill its traditional public moral right and duty, which is to judge, direct, correct, and then consent to, the courses of foreign policy?

There is a sentimental subjectivist scriptural fundamentalism. But this theory by definition has nothing to say about foreign policy; it is at best a theory of interpersonal relationships and therefore irrelevant to international relations, which are not interpersonal. There is also moral ambigusism. But this, in the final analysis, is not properly a moral theory. It is perhaps a technique of historical analysis, highly doctrinaire in style; but it is not an ethical philosophy. It is an interesting paradoxical structure of rhetorical categories; but it is not a normative doctrine that could base discriminating moral judgments. All norms vanish amid the multiplying paradoxes; and all discrimination is swallowed up in the cavernous interior of the constantly recurrent verdict: "This action is morally ambiguous."

The school of ambigusist thought has done some useful negative service by its corrosive critique of older types of moral simplism and political utopianism. But it has no positive constructive power to fashion purposeful public policies in an age of crisis. It can throw rocks after the event, but it can lay no cornerstones. It points out all the moral hazards, and takes none. The self-contradiction inherent in sin is indeed a massive fact of the human condition; but not for this reason, or any other, does ambiguity become a virtue in moral judgment. Ambigusism can judge no policies save those that history has already judged. It can direct no policies because it can specify no ends toward which policy should be directed. And it can correct no policies since all policies deserve by definition the same qualification, "ambiguous," and what use is it to correct one ambiguous course by substituting another? We can discard ambigusism as the moral premise of public policy.

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What is there left? There is, of course, the pseudomorality of secular liberalism, especially of the academic variety. Its basic premise is a curious version of the Socratic paradox, that knowledge is virtue; it asserts that, if only we really could get to understand everybody, our foreign policy would inevitably be good. The trouble is that the past failures of the political intelligence of secular liberalism, and its demonstrated capacities for misunderstanding, have already pretty much discredited it.

Finally, there is the ubiquitous pragmatist, whose concern is only with what will work. But he too wins no confidence, since most of us have already learned from the pragmatist source of truth, which is history, that whatever is not true will fail to work. We want to know the political truth that will base workable policies.

It would seem, therefore, that the moral footing has been eroded from beneath the political principle of consent, which has now come to designate nothing more than the technique of majority opinion as the guide of public action—a technique as apt to produce fatuity in policy and tyranny of rule as to produce wisdom and justice. It was not always so. In the constitutional theory of the West the principle of consent found its moral basis in the belief, which was presumed sufficiently to be the fact, that the people are the living repository of a moral tradition, possessed at least as a heritage of wisdom, that enables them to know what is reasonable in the action of the state—its laws, its public policies, its uses of force. The people consent because it is reasonable to consent to what, with some evidence, appears as reasonable. Today no such moral tradition lives among the American people—certainly not, as Professor Hartt suggests, the tradition of reason, which is known as the ethic of natural law. Those who seek the ironies of history should find one here, in the fact that the ethic which launched Western constitutionalism and endured long enough as a popular heritage to give essential form to the American system of government has now ceased to sustain the structure and direct the action of this constitutional commonwealth.

The situation is not such as to gladden the heart. But at least one knows the right question in the present matter. It is not how foreign policy is to be guided by the norms of morality. It is, rather, what is the morality by whose norms foreign policy is to be guided?

In the magazines

Sidney Hook and Bertrand Russell have reopened their debate on the basic issues of peace and freedom in the Cold War. In the April 11 issue of The New Leader, Dr. Hook returns to the theme of disarmament and attacks recent statements made by Russell which seemed to imply not only that "we must be prepared to sacrifice freedom if that is the price of peace," but that the differences between East and West on the matter of an inspection system are not such as to put the West wholly in the right and the East wholly in the wrong.

"Is it necessary," asks Dr. Hook, "to remind Bertrand Russell of what he once knew so very well? If the West signs an agreement to cease testing or to destroy nuclear weapons, the Soviet Union can rely upon the provisions being fulfilled. The converse, alas, is not equally true . . . If for any reason Great Britain and the United States were tempted to violate their agreement on nuclear disarmament, the slightest infraction would be broadcast to the entire world by a press, a radio, a television system which the government does not control . . . Where is the free public opinion which can make it possible for one of [the USSR's] citizens who detects a violation to expose it to the world?"

It is exactly this contention, which he terms "Western self-righteousness," that Lord Russell criticizes in his turn (The New Leader, May 9): "One of the things which I find most regrettable in Hook and the controversialists of the Kremlin is the assumption that one's own side is wholly virtuous and the other side wholly base . . . Western Europe, which according to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is to be defended by the U.S. if necessary, has lately learned, with understandable dismay, that there is considerable doubt as to whether the U.S. would, in fact, fulfill its treaty obligations."

As to the matter of freedom, "I hope that Hook will note that I have not said either that the Communists are more trustworthy or have more freedom than the West, or even that they are as trustworthy or have as much freedom as the West. Nor have I said that the West has less freedom than it had. I say only that it has less freedom than it boasts and that it is not as impeccably trustworthy as it sometimes thinks it is. I believe, however, that the Communists have much more freedom than they had a few years ago. . . . The calm assumption that of course the other side would cheat, but of course our side would not, is made by both sides. But to hear some champions of the West speaking, one would never guess that the other side can be equally sincere in its suspicions."