

THE POLITICAL ETHICS OF DEAN ACHESON

A View from the Steerage

Everett Gendler

For some time now the going has been rough. The crest of one crisis is hardly followed by the trough of false resolution when the next billow comes surging along to pitch us sharply once more. And in such turbulent waters it is, of course, hard for those up on the bridge to spend much time or energy giving us below reassurance about crew, compasses, routings, or destination. A nice but vague flow of words, sounding suspiciously pre-recorded, and that is all.

But now and then one comes down from the bridge, relieved of duties up there, and from him there are impressions to be had. Such is the case with Mr. Dean Acheson, and the impressions are far from encouraging.

Mr. Acheson termed the address he delivered at Amherst last December "Ethics in International Relations Today." Cause for alarm is found already in the second sentence of Mr. Acheson's address, with its facile dismissal of what are deemed to be the limiting extremes of nonsense between which sense is to be found: "the righteous who seek to deduce foreign policy from ethical or moral principles" and "the modern Machiavellis who would conduct our foreign relations without regard to them."

But these are fantasy figures, extreme constructs, and to dismiss them is not in fact to dismiss any real position. I, for example, have not met, even among those with whom I disagree profoundly, any who disregard entirely ethical or moral principles in foreign relations. Even "strategists" take them into account, if only to dismiss them as minimally relevant to immediate policy decisions. But this hardly makes them "Machiavellian"; in this respect they instead happen to resemble rather precisely Mr. Acheson.

As for those wondrously pure "righteous" ones, again I am puzzled. Where has Mr. Acheson found such immediate deductions from moral principles to precise policies? Where has he found the utter disregard for circumstances, needs, and conditions which his phrase implies? It is true that the "deduc-

tions" of foreign policy positions by such "righteous" ones as the War Resisters League, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and the American Friends Service Committee, reveal time after time a keen regard for concrete realities (human beings, moral scruples, etc.) as well as for strategic abstractions ("power-political" factors) in a given situation. But is the inclusion of human considerations to be scorned and dismissed quite so simply?

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The caricature which begins Mr. Acheson's presumed clarification of confusion in thinking about foreign policy is not a promising one. Regrettably, the elements of caricature do not decrease as Mr. Acheson proceeds.

There follows quickly a specification of what "we, and a good part of the non-Communist world" regard as ethical principles of conduct, and Mr. Acheson finds them mostly applicable to "the behavior of individuals toward one another. . . . There is pretty general agreement that it is better to act straightforwardly, candidly, honorably, and courageously than duplicitously, conspiratorially, or treacherously." Reading this formulation of standards of proper conduct among individuals, I wonder first about the non-inclusion of the Communist world. For individual men within Communist countries, are duplicity, conspiracy, and treachery actually preferred to "our" virtues? I doubt it.

As for the easy transfer of these, "our" virtues, to our diplomacy, even "where an important purpose of diplomacy is to further enduring good relations between states," I again wonder if it is all that clear. Mr. Acheson's own sources are not quite so self-righteous or simplistic as he. Françoise de Callières, "as sound an adviser today as he was in 1716" according to Mr. Acheson, contributes some very interesting insights indeed into "the French school of diplomacy," that which Mr. Acheson commends as "probably still the best ever devised." De Callières does recommend the virtues cited by Mr. Acheson, but that is not quite all he has to say:

"It frequently happens in negotiations as in war

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that well-chosen spies contribute more than any other agency to the success of great plans, and indeed it is clear that there is nothing so well adapted to upset the best design as the sudden and premature revelation of an important secret upon which it depends. And as there is no expense better designed nor more necessary than that which is laid out upon a secret service, it would be inexcusable for a minister of state to neglect it. The general will say with truth that he would sooner have one regiment the less than a poorly equipped system of espionage, and that he would perhaps even forego reinforcements if he could be accurately informed of the disposition and numbers of the enemy armies. Similarly let an ambassador retrench all superfluous expense in order that he may have the funds at his disposal to maintain a secret service which will inform him of all that happens in the foreign country of his service.

"The ambassador has sometimes been called an honourable spy because one of his principal occupations is to discover great secrets; and he fails in the discharge of his duty if he does not know how to lay out the necessary sums for this purpose. Therefore an ambassador should be a man born with a liberal hand ready to undertake willingly large expenses of this kind; and he must be even prepared to do it at his own charges when the emoluments of his master are insufficient. For as his principal aim must be to succeed, that interest should eclipse all others in any man truly devoted to his profession and capable of succeeding in it."

—*On the Manner of Negotiating with Princes*,
(pp. 26–28)

It is also true that he warns against participation in direct intrigues and cabals against reigning powers, but he goes on to make clear that

"there is all the difference between the attempt to debauch the subjects of a sovereign prince in order to ensnare them in conspiracy against him, and the legitimate endeavour to use every opportunity for acquiring information. The latter practice has always been permissible, and indeed is a necessary part of diplomacy. No criticism can fall upon a foreign envoy who successfully adopts the practice; the only culprit in such a case is the citizen of a foreign state who from corrupt motives sells information abroad."

Ibid., (pp. 87–88)

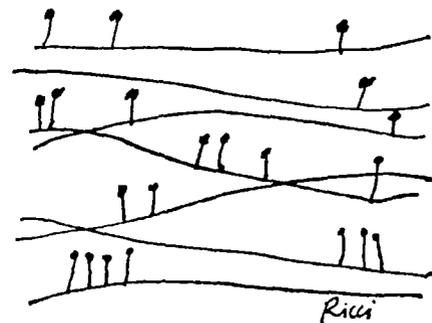
Confronted with these quotations, and without knowledge of their author, how many onlookers

would ascribe them immediately to "our" side, which, Mr. Acheson assures us, esteems straightforward, candid, honorable, and courageous behavior? It would, I suspect, take a bit of doing. What a pity that where an honest portrayal of our common imperfections could have reduced inappropriate smugness or self-righteousness and might have helped restore some sound perspective, Mr. Acheson chose instead to reiterate distorting slogans.

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Nor is my disappointment much reduced when Mr. Acheson comes to his ethical analysis itself. Distinguishing a final goal, "to preserve and foster an environment in which free societies may exist and flourish," from certain intermediate "moral or ethical principles" which are often put forth as guides to proper conduct, Mr. Acheson finds the intermediate principles relative and inadequate.

He is critical, for example, of the maxim of "self-determination," and cites a number of inappropriate invocations of this principle which are to the point. But does the criticism go deep enough? In each instance cited, "self-determination" was invoked in a purely nation-state context, with power political factors playing a substantial distorting role. The attempts of leaders everywhere to use the principle of "self-determination" as the cover for their conversion of human beings into power pawns indeed deserves criticism.



But what is the real problem? Is "self-determination" a useless principle? Or is its possible application as a principle in favor of cultural autonomy, linguistic difference, and regional uniqueness rather defeated by the needs of leaders of power-seeking states to reduce difference to uniformity for the sake of greater "national power?" Genuine self-determination in cultural, religious, and linguistic respects seems to require a total political context different from the present system of nation-states jockeying for power. The conclusion one might draw in such an instance is that even the best intentioned of national entities today threaten meaningful human

self-determination no matter how hard they may try to preserve it. The willingness to play the power game, be it in Cyprus, Europe, Canada, or other areas, may in fact be that which most directly prevents meaningful self-determination by human beings.

Viewed in this light, might not "creating an environment in which free societies may flourish" require radical system changes on the world scene? Or massive programs of genuine economic aid, however hard to effectuate (and *not* designed with profit guarantees increasing still further the gaps between rich and poor nations!)? What better place to mention them than on a college campus? And who could speak more persuasively of the need than one of Mr. Acheson's stature? How disappointing that of this dimension of our problem there is hardly a hint.

Nor is there any concern expressed for another aspect of effective freedom seriously jeopardized by current tactics. Is our own society significantly free if we are, in fact, trapped by the opponents' strategy, as Mr. Acheson suggests? Where is freedom of moral action, or freedom to select appropriate and acceptable means, if all one can propose, in response to force or its threat, is its imitation? How genuinely free is a strategy which must abjectly adopt the tactics of the opponent? Any concern for effective freedom today must face this problem, at once moral and strategic.

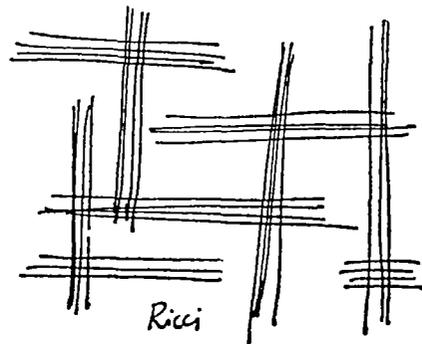
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But it is at the heart of his ethical analysis that Mr. Acheson seems most deficient. Of *genuine* moral principles, of those deep commitments to the value and sanctity of human life which one finds in religious and philosophical thought, there is hardly a mention. The power-political market-place, abounding in noisy but finally insubstantial slogans, seems the sole source of Mr. Acheson's "ethics." He is right in categorizing those slogans as a confusing collection. But why had he not the courage, in the conducive college setting, to apply some serious canons of ethical judgment to policy decisions? Buber's I-Thou, or Kantian ethics, or even a consideration of traditional "just war" doctrines might have provided some kind of genuine moral perspective. But of this there is none. Only that slogan, increasingly devoid or discernible content, "creating an environment in which free societies may flourish."

That together with an absurd clinging to the hollow and self-defeating tokens of power beyond the point where they have anything except anti-human meaning and application. How else explain Mr. Acheson's incredibly cavalier treatment of the Cuban

crisis of October, 1962, and the decision to produce thermonuclear weapons? "Moral talk did not bear on the problem." No, I suppose not. At least it did not bear on those who were making decisions at the time. They were too busy chasing their beloved abstraction of "creating an environment in which free societies may flourish" to worry about the preservation of life as such on this planet. They were too beguiled by "experts" and "strategists" to worry about "moral judgments," though the latter may be far better guides than the former.

Morals did not enter into decision making, that is clear. But *should* they have? Has any human being or group of human beings the right to threaten all life on this planet for any purported end whatsoever, be they successful in a given case or not? (And what of "next time"?) The implicit claim of Mr. Acheson that there are those "public servants" who have such rights is so monstrous that I find it hard to believe. Have "public servants" the right to abrogate, without referendum, those definitions of moral means and decent human behavior that some of us thought our society as a whole accepted and tried to act upon? Are we simply to be re-made in the image of the supposedly "principled" evil we claim to resist.



Even by Mr. Acheson's cherished strategic considerations it is far from clear that this is wise policy. Some of the hazy notions which take shelter under the wings of "strategic thinking" are nicely enumerated in Anatol Rapoport's *Strategy and Conscience*, and no less a cyberneticist than the late Norbert Wiener has some cogent things to say in *God and Golem, Inc.*, including this incontestable fact: "At present, there are no experts in atomic warfare."

How, then, do the Dean Achesons of our world dare place such faith in thermonuclear "strategy"? Is the confidence well-founded that their wisdom surpasses that of those countless generations before us which at least tried to live by some scruples and which did manage to keep most wars within some limits? It is alarming in the extreme to discover that

an astute and able diplomatic policy maker, a "public servant" of presumably as decent a national power as is to be found on the world scene today, is finally willing to consider unspeakable barbarities on behalf of ill-defined interests and power-political abstractions. It is the shocking fact that all those limitations on human destructiveness, so painfully developed over millenia and once violated only by those held ultimately in contempt by all decent human beings, no longer bind "us." We have "freed" ourselves from those moral constraints which for centuries helped restrain the murderousness of human conflict; and now, with technology having magnified our destructive powers beyond imagining, we at last find ourselves living in one of the "freest" societies that men have ever known: morally "free" to engage in destructive activity exceeding anything previously known on this planet!

How dazzling (or dim) the view must be from up there on the bridge! What strange instruments they must have for charting our course. And how

queer the weather must be when the fetching new umbrella of nuclear deterrence is preferred to the old one of moral restraint!

It's a strange wind blowing, that even I can tell, and it's getting choppier. The pre-taped words of reassurance sound hollow, more wind-blown than ever, and that man Acheson, down from upper deck, hasn't helped. "Without vision the people perish." Too bad it's so murky up there.

It is less murky down here in steerage, and there are still those of us who adhere to what was once conceded verbally, even by the Achesons of this world, to be a morality of sorts. That it was fashioned of old (and ill-executed) does not necessarily mean that it is out of date.

It is less murky down here. There is enough light to determine by which charts and whose hands the ship is being "guided," and enough light to distinguish false friends from true, destroyers from true defenders.

Is not a change of charts and crew long past due?

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