

THE BURDEN OF FREEDOM

The Political Situation Viewed as an Ethical Situation

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It is the continuing concern of *worldview* and its sponsoring organization, The Council on Religion and International Affairs, to probe the relationship among religion, ethics, and foreign policy. Most of this concern seems to be directed toward analysis and evaluation of substantive policy issues, which are, of course, vitally important. But it may be equally important to investigate the *process* of religion-ethics-policy interaction. This essay examines one aspect of that process: how ethical consciousness can pervade the decision-making process. This problem will be approached by looking at three inter-related questions: a) what are the political responsibilities which flow to the individual in the free society? b) what is the character of those responsibilities? c) how can we best fulfill those responsibilities?

We are inclined to define the free society as one which provides a free condition for individuals and social groups. This is understandable, and valid, too, providing that this view of personal freedom recognizes that freedom begins with a limitation of itself. But characteristically, this view of freedom is self-oriented, and it concerns only the personal benefits of the free society.

It is equally necessary—though not as soothing—to understand the responsibilities and obligations which accrue to the individual in the free society. Most basically, these responsibilities flow from the fact that the free society means not only that I am free (at least relatively), but also that society itself is in large part undefined and unspecified, and the state which caps society is free and unlimited. The basic fact is that *we* determine the character of our political society everyday—and we determine it just as surely by inaction as by action.

Nietzsche pronounced that “God is dead”—and in a crucial sense he is correct. For there is no authoritative voice of God which will be accepted by the political order, there is no single church—there is

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instead a condition of ethical pluralism. There is no omniscient God-King to decide our political fate and to seek political rectitude—we do it, in the context of a secular democracy. It is in this sense that Nietzsche is so profoundly right: for political purposes, God—or the Good—exists today only in persons, in us.

Thus, the notion of the free society means that we are responsible for the life and directions of our political community. Of course, we employ representatives for the actual operations of politics, but they are *our* representatives, and their presence does not allow us to avoid the fundamental responsibilities. And there is more than a little irony in the fact that this political responsibility has become ours at the precise moment when the stakes and implications of politics are probably greater than ever before. For this is an intensely political time. The environmental context for the individual is one increasingly ordered by the state. In pursuit of the welfare of modern industrial mass society, the state is driven to involvement in more and more areas of human activity, so that today its impact permeates the whole social structure. The characteristic problems of our age—education, social security, the welfare of the aged, labor-management relations, economic interdependence and disruption, international conflict—more and more call for political responses. As Archbishop Hurley of South Africa has observed, “On political decisions hangs the fate of millions—poverty or prosperity, starvation or plenty, order or agitation, sound domestic life or broken homes, *the preservation or disintegration of the institutions that are the framework of social morals, love or hate, peace or war.*” (Italics added.)

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What has been suggested thus far is easily perceived: in a democracy, the person has political responsibility and this is especially critical in our age. But what is the character of this responsibility? What kind of thing is the political act, for which we have now become responsible?

The controlling fact here is that the political act is an ethical act, and inescapably so, and the political

decision is an expression of ethical judgment. Any significant political decision consists in distinguishing and choosing from value alternatives, and is thus an ethical action. The relation of ethics and politics, then, is permeative, not additive.

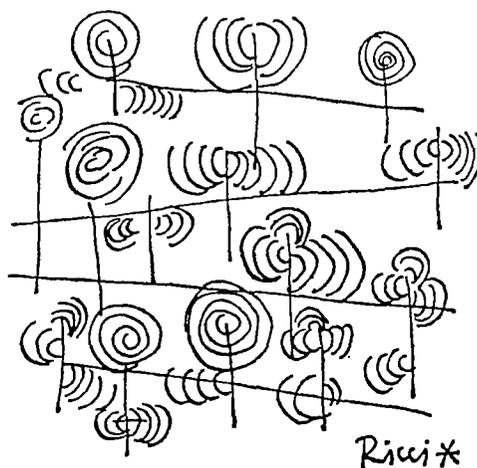
There is an abundance of confusion on this point today, and the confusion derives from a wrong putting of the question. If you start by asking "How can we bring ethics to political actions?" you will almost surely end in despair, espousing the theory of the unbridgeable gap between the public and the private ethic. This attitude was recently illustrated by a representative of a Catholic college. Protesting American involvement in Vietnam, this person said: "While I cannot offer a program for what the State and Defense Department should do, there are some things I personally cannot do or, by silence, in effect support. I think the churches have to witness to the human and moral issues involved. Even if we cannot make a complete judgment on all social economic and military factors, we can still make a moral judgment on the war's basic inhumanity." Here is seen the complete splintering of the political problem, as if it were really possible to extract the "human and moral" issues from the policy itself, and as if it were possible morally to judge the policy without appraising *all* the factors.

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This represents what I am calling the "additive" view of the relation between politics and ethics. It is seen everytime someone says "Let's not simply do the expedient, let's do the right." This presupposes a conflict between the two, and a separation. It seems also to presume that the right will often be the ineffective, or the martyr-like. This same attitude also breeds what might be called the "ethical thunderbolt" approach to political commentary, where typically a clergyman who hitherto has had nothing to do with politics except to be properly reverential on the Fourth of July suddenly—and publicly—concludes that "nausea gas is intrinsically inhumane, therefore our Vietnam policy is bankrupt."

Not only is the "ethical thunderbolt" approach irrelevant, but it also contributes to a wider problem: the general irrelevance of the religious and ethical voice, and the negative attitude many policy-makers have toward this voice. It helps to explain the attitude, for example, of Dean Acheson, who recently stated that "the righteous who seek to deduce foreign policy from ethical or moral principles are as misleading and misled as the modern Machiavelli's who would conduct our foreign relations without regard to them." If you start from the premise that

there is a world of ethics and a world of politics, and the problem is how to bring them together, you are doomed. You do not have a political situation and then bring some ethics to it as you might season a stew. The political situation is an ethical situation. Indeed, the political act is simply a species of ethics and is, perhaps, the supreme ethical act because it has implications for all men in society and will deeply influence their lives. The only pertinent question therefore is "How can the ethical dimension of politics be most enlightened? What kind of ethical consciousness—good or bad, clear or hazy—will be in the decision-making situation?" And that question can be refined one step further: "What kind of ethical consciousness will be within the decision-maker?"



This was understood in ages past, and we might better perceive it ourselves if we look back at an earlier example. Four and a half centuries ago, Erasmus was concerned as we are concerned with the ethical character of his nation's politics. In response to this concern, he wrote *The Institution of a Christian Prince*, primarily for the edification of the man who would become Charles V. This treatise, a classic statement in the Mirror of Princes tradition, seems unreal to us now, but in the age of kings it was a realistic attempt to cultivate an ethical dimension in the person who would make political decisions. It was realistic, I say, because the king was the genuine repository of power who would shape and determine the fate of society. And it was realistic, too, in that it recognized the integrality of the political act: if you want enlightened and humane policy, then promote the ethical consciousness of the policy-maker.

The kings are gone, of course, and the problem has changed in one respect—but it remains constant in another. The public and its representatives pos-

ness power today, and they jointly will determine the nation's political fate. Enlightenment today, if it is to be at all, must now be in them *and* us.

Several points have been made thus far, and we need to synthesize them before taking up the final, and most important question. The modern state is a frightening phenomenon: we are more dependent on it, we need it and its activities, it can serve us well—but it can also be an awful instrument of human devastation. Thus the state is an ethical instrument, its acts are ethical acts, and *we* are personally responsible for its conduct. If these points are true, then the compelling question becomes “How can we insure the ethical enlightenment of our nation? *How can we make the state good?*”

We must begin by recognizing that there are no guarantees of political efficacy, no formulas which we can invoke. We cannot take refuge in a Constitution, or draw solace from the illusion that the Founding Fathers resolved our problems once and for all. The corollary of this is that the only way the power of the modern state can be contained and focused on legitimate and worthy tasks is by the constant participation of a politically aware and virtuous citizenry. For if the Twentieth Century proves nothing else, it demonstrates conclusively that a vacuum of political knowledge and virtue will soon be filled by forces of destruction—the bigots, the bandits, the tyrants.

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But this is well known, at least abstractly, and once it is stated the basic question remains: *what to do?* To this question, I will give three answers, three kinds of concretizations, all of which call for personal action from the intermediate elites between the mass public and governing representatives. *First* and obviously, it is necessary to assess and evaluate specific policy proposals as they arise within the governmental apparatus. Such serious public discussion of the ethical aspects of policy makes those aspects politically relevant in a genuine representative system, for the actual decision-makers act within the confine of public concern and are influenced by it.

This approach to ethical permeation—the *ad hoc* appraising of *ad hoc* policies—is clearly necessary and needs doing and re-doing continuously. However, it has certain built-in limitations which make it not invalid, but insufficient. A given policy is always in large part circumstantial, i.e., it derives from certain new, unique circumstances and must be judged within them. Often times, knowledge required for such appraisal is simply not obtainable by the public, and judgment must be withheld. Then, too,

in our age, many policies are spontaneous and instantaneous and literally give no time for extended public evaluations.

It is, therefore, necessary to suggest a *second*, different, and immensely more important kind of ethical permeation which should be sought. We must create and sustain an ethically enlightened climate or context within which our political decisions will be made. In other words, as Erasmus knew, to best assure rectitude in decisions, ethical consciousness must actually pervade the whole decision-making process. The conscious person, who is seriously concerned with the efficacy of policy and wants to influence it, will bring about this ethical pervasion first by coming to know the political system, by identifying the actual locations of power within the political process. He will learn how influence can be brought to bear on political parties, on pressure groups, and on legislative proposals.

He will relate himself to these points of power, both as an individual and as a member of politically active groups. In this way, he will consecrate the political order of things, and transform it. In this way, the political order will be permeated by the good in the person. The enlightened person will come to know that a political party, for example, need not be a den of thieves, but should be a haven for the people with Golden Souls who have a genuine concern for human welfare and recognize that the political system is a prime determiner here.

And *finally*, conscious persons will begin to identify criteria of moral sensitivity to be applied to those seeking high public office. They will want to know, perhaps, a candidate's religious convictions, but especially the social and political implications he draws from them; they will want to know his philosophic judgments; they will be concerned with his strength, his courage, and his prudence. They will insist on trying to assess these qualities as accurately as the political scene allows, because they will know that these are the qualities the leader takes with him into the arena of decision-making. In this new decision-maker, we will witness the re-integration of the political act. The artificial chasm between the expedient and the right will be bridged by integral persons.

This is a skeletal and unelaborated presentation of how, I believe, the modern democratic state can be made the good state. And this will come to pass if we judge that the character of society will be profoundly shaped by political decisions, and that it is therefore imperative that those decisions be right; and finally, it will come to pass if we judge that the root responsibility for those decisions is personally and excruciatingly ours.