

# PACIFISM: THE DYNAMICS OF DISSENT

Edmund J. Egan

In the current wave of conscientious objection, draft refusal, pacifism, crypto-pacifism and simple concern with war and morality, it is noteworthy that informed discussion of "just war" theory has been at a minimum. This fact is worth examining within a somewhat wider philosophical dimension than is perhaps customary.

The notion of "just war" represents an aspect of classical, even Hellenic ethical theory. In it the emphasis is macrocosmic, taking as its starting point the community considered as an organic whole, and seeking the "common good" of that community. This search for "common good" necessarily entails a balancing of claims, rights and needs. Historically, such a calculus has for its goal a benevolent reasonableness in the society, a quality that has generally been termed justice.

This classical, macrocosmic and very practical notion of justice has been the source of the extraordinary attempt in the West to bring about societal order through reason and has resulted finally in the eminently reasonable institutions of representative democracy. It has also, in its very emphasis on the *common good*, tended to neglect the microcosmic dimension of the ethical, i.e., the individual person and the immediate relational realities of his existence. Thus we may note the concrete attitudes which our civilization has maintained, for example, toward such persons as women, children, Jews, criminals and political enemies, and toward practices of torture, execution, and the various forms of slavery. To make this observation is not to excoriate past and less highly evolved ethical moments in history. But the attitudes that supported these moments do deserve condemnation when they are extended into the present, and here precisely lies our problem about war — its morality and its rationale. What we seek here is an explication of the relation between morality as such *and* this rationale, and analogously, an understanding of how moral vision and civic reason may be related when confronted with the singular phenomenon of war.

The state, or civil government, as a natural function of benevolent reason, is properly delimited to the macrocosm, the sphere of justice. Or, conversely, one

may say that the justice of the state is limited to those judgments and consequent acts that are vindicated by practical reason. Thus government implements social welfare not through charity, but because in an affluent society it would be absurd not to. The government may come to dispense with corporal and capital punishment not because these things are wrong, but because they are both unpleasant and unnecessary. Of course in each of the instances mentioned, individuals and communities within the larger society anticipate the reasoning of the society by their prophetic moral vision, which has in its turn a part in quickening the reasoning processes of the society. And in the discussion of war, the microcosmic and macrocosmic approaches to ethics easily become confused as they are found to oppose each other.

•

A great deal has been made in the discussion of modern war of the moral problem of means: "Enlightened" modern states have, at best, dispensed only with *unnecessary* torment in conducting their wars. When Christians, perhaps recalling St. Thomas' concern with the ethical propriety of ambush, came to grips with strategic bombing, napalm and nuclear deterrence, a certain malaise was to be expected. However, I personally think it unrealistic to expect that moral sense be made of the problem of means *within* the context of war. The *cause* of war is likely to be just insofar as the enemy is wicked, and a wicked enemy is unlikely to scruple over means. Those who do scruple can have little hope of defeating a less scrupulous enemy of nearly equal power.

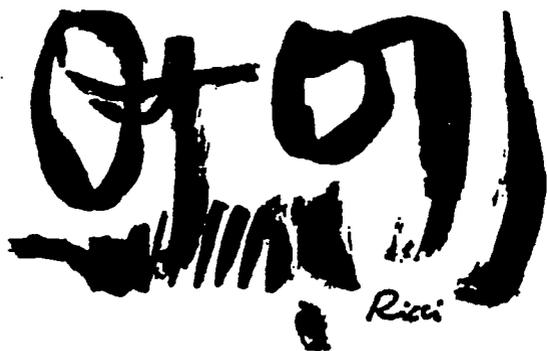
Reasoning like this is of course dangerous. It can lead one toward either pacifism or a kind of reluctant cynicism, and much of the thrust of the "just war" tradition has consisted of the attempt to avoid such a moral polarization. But modern military technology, together with the increasing interdependence of units within modern political societies, has brought about "totalization" of war. Humanitarian reason, under the aegis of "justice," had asked that no more killing and suffering than necessary be inflicted in war. Further, it required a convincing reason for wars in the first place, and sought some check upon the ever-incipient madness of violence. Despite these Apollonian hopes, the dialectic of force has resulted in an escalation of

---

Mr. Egan is a member of the department of philosophy at Loyola College in Montreal.

terror. In the modern world to speak of moral means in warfare is something of a cruel joke.

At the same time that this "maturation" of war has rendered impracticable the classical canons of restraint, a newly microcosmic dimension of ethical imperative has developed within our culture. This dimension, that of human subjectivity, is of course not absolutely new; self-consciousness is as old as man. Throughout most of man's history, however, the subjective has been encapsulated within the ongoing "objective" context of tradition, a tradition that represented a continuity between what had always been done, what needed to be done, and what ought to be done. As is well known, modern critical thought has undercut the authority of tradition as such, thereby drastically diminishing its power to structure ethics. At the same time we have come to see as never before the significance of the human subject in his will, his conscience and his individuality.



The result of this has been a revival and restatement of the ancient principle of the autonomy of individual conscience. In the modern world, furthermore, in order to be ethical *at all*, men must, in the words of Walter Dirks, become "*more free, more conscious and more fully responsible*" (emphasis mine). This forcing into relief of the responsible self has coincided, moreover, with a microcosmic emphasis in philosophy itself. Concept and category have given place to the relational structures of existence. Even as Husserl has called us "to the things themselves," ethics has become able to turn to the acts, to the active relations, themselves. Camus once put the matter succinctly when speaking of capital punishment: "Do not let them say: 'He has paid his debt to society.' Make them say rather: 'We have cut his head off.'"

This sort of descriptive honesty, so important to the phenomenological mystique, is at the heart of the matter in the question of war. Today we are not so wont to discuss only the cause of war, and the

balancing of goods hoped for against evils feared. We have become concerned with what *happens* in war itself: the lying, the hardening of hearts, the atrophy of conscience, the burning, the killing. We are of course shocked by the massive image of nuclear war, by the imminence of holocaust. But what actually touches us here is not merely shock at the incommensurate evil threatened by certain "means"; it is rather that reality is shown forth by hyperbole. Quantity seems to pass over into quality; war is seen to be what it has been all the while. In a frightful irony, our shock before the absurd exaggeration that is nuclear war turns our eyes to what is the core reality of war itself. The hyperbole becomes part of that rhetoric of pacifism which ever insists on the *microcosm*, the meaning of the privileged moment, on the encounter between persons who are "at war" each with the other.

•

What forms does this microcosmic approach take, and how does it most profoundly differ from that of the morally concerned man who remains with the older, "classical" tradition? First of all, the pacifist sees evil in lending his moral presence *through his action* to the great cycle of anonymous cruelty and killing. It is cruelty and killing which most men do not *want*, but which nevertheless they *will* and *do* in the service of common causes to be joined and greater evils to be avoided. This last notion, that of the greater evils to be avoided, is the most powerful argument against the pacifist vision. In this view, those men who are not before me here and now have just as great an immediate demand upon my love, my loyalty, my brotherhood in Christ, as does this enemy whom I kill for the sake of the larger community of mankind. The sin of omission is as great as that of commission; a continuity of moral meaning and obligation reaches over the apparent distance between an act and its refusal. What counts in the balance is the issue.

The pacifist, however, refuses to serve as a link in what he sees as a vicious circle of horror indicated by necessity. Work as he will, politically, socially, culturally, for the fruitful issue of history in his time, he has found the killing of another man a qualitative insult to the demand of love. He cannot say to the other: "I love you; you are my brother; you shall die." He knows that the killing and evil will come; in a real dimension of history they are even necessary. But possessed by the vision of man's radical solidarity with the explicit concreteness of his own act, he insists that the cutting, the burning, the horror, the death of the other shall not come forth *from his hand*. It is perhaps at present necessary that these things

must come, but he will not be one through whom they come.

The moral vision of the pacifist is thus one in which a permanent constellation of circumstance has been discerned in the moral universe. To intend, to decide the death of *this* other man, these other men, who desire to live, cancels out the enduring and abiding declaration of love that he believes he owes to all *and to each*. History, however, and his society within that history, are not yet possessed of this vision. How then, we must ask, is the pacifist to relate to this history in the dimension of it from which he is excluded? How, precisely, is he to address himself to his government in its decisions pertaining to the making of war?

All too often, the pacifist tends at this point to confuse two dimensions of the search for the moral truth, dimensions that this paper has attempted to distinguish. The reasonableness of governmental action in seeking the temporal commonweal is, in a democracy, a quality that must at least in theory commend itself to a consensus of all sane citizens. Therefore it is obvious that the government cannot be asked to share a moral vision, a metaphysical perspective, or a theology. If the government is sane, it will recognize spheres which lie outside of it. It will legally permit, for example, its citizens conscientiously to object to its wars, and to refuse to serve. The pacifist, if he is sane, will not snipe at his government from a position of visionary moral judgment that is foreign to government by its very nature. And in his critiques of political "morality," i.e., governmental rationality and the honesty demanded of reason, he will not confuse questions bearing upon government with elements drawn from the area of his moral vision.

This last point has become crucial in the complex of protest and critique surrounding the Vietnam war. The pacifist's argument is generally directed against war itself, and one therefore can maintain that his

protest against *this* war is specifically tautologous. It may be argued, on the contrary—since the pacifist insight so intimately relates to the concreteness, even to the detail of *what happens* in war, what, indeed *to kill* means—that the current conflict presents him with a special opportunity to utter what is here termed the "rhetoric" of pacifism. Why is this so? First of all, the character of the fighting, so clearly unglamorous and brutal, gives rhetoric its chance, as does the torment of a civilian population which is being slaughtered in a contest between rival interpretations of common good. Second, and more interesting, is the fact that the surge of disagreement in the United States about the very justice of the war, i.e., the coherence of its rationale, has permitted people, who would otherwise have their perceptions beclouded by patriotism, to consider the rhetoric and the existential dimension to which it applies. Though the justice of the cause and the nature of the means in war are two different matters, doubts about the former can occasion a real and valuable opportunity for more people honestly to consider the latter.

It is easy, unfortunately, to confuse these two dimensions. People who are not pacifists and who are not at all sure of their position respecting the justice of our presence in Vietnam borrow from pacifist rhetoric to bolster any weakness or lack of certitude in their political and historical logic. For example, protesters who are presumably seeking cessation of bombing in the North and negotiations with the N.L.F., march under posters depicting maimed babies. Genuine pacifists, for their part, can be led by the power of their moral passion to concoct facile political analyses, while "borderline" pacifists can arrive at premature philosophical certitude through their indignation over a particular "unjust war."

Such confusion is less likely to arise from patent disingenuousness than from pious fraud. Furthermore, even confused protest is preferable to atrophy of criticism and dissent. The real and great danger of the confusion is threefold. First of all, the positive moral force that pacifism can exert, including the devout quest for nonviolent alternatives, can be weakened if pacifists lose their purity of vision. Secondly, the reasoned protest against American policy in Vietnam can be muddied and discredited by confusion with a pacifist protest as such. Finally, the enthusiastic affirmation of confusion that united front movements elicit may cause the Government to despair of any notion of dialogue with protesters, and to overreact vindictively against active dissenters such as C.O.'s. Only political nihilists, including the perennial



advocates of apocalypse at any price, could welcome a development such as this.

The confirmed pacifist, on the other hand, who is also morally certain of the sheer injustice of *this* war, has compounded motivation and energy for his dissent. It remains important for him, nevertheless, to retain discrete perspectives about his two-edged sword, so that what is ideationally distinct may be the more existentially united.

A last word here is due to what is perhaps the most difficult practical position of all, that of the non-pacifist who is convinced of the injustice of this war. He is morally bound to obey his conscience and to refuse military service, but his conscientious objection is of its nature *ad hoc*. He is operating, albeit often with religious courage and love, on a classical, humanistic ethical base. He is refusing to murder. Yet legally no provision is made for his act of conscience. He is op-

erating on the same plane as the government he challenges; he and his government disagree on a political and historical analysis. At this writing, the Government seems unlikely to permit conscientious objection so close to home.

Furthermore, despite the improbability of draft evaders involving themselves in the demanding and problematic mechanism of C.O. registration, the state does face a *de jure* problem in establishing grounds for acceptable *ad hoc* conscientious objection. This fact, of course, brings up the difficulty of our accepted system of conscription in the light of the classical and traditional Christian teaching on conscience and just war. We are left with the irony that the society legally accepts pacifists, those moral visionaries who claim to transcend the state's authority. Meanwhile, the greater burden of conscience in this very trying moment seems destined for those dissenters who challenge the Government and its war on the ground of a properly and distinctly political moral critique.

## CRIA PUBLICATIONS

Ethics and Foreign Policy Series  
[50¢ each — Set of 13 \$5.50 prepaid]

**ETHICS AND NATIONAL PURPOSE**

*by Kenneth W. Thompson*

**MORALITY AND MODERN WAR**

*by John Courtney Murray, S.J.*

**RELIGION AND INTERNATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY**

*by Robert Gordis*

**THE RECOVERY OF ETHICS**

*by Paul H. Nitze*

**SOUTH AFRICA: PROBLEMS**

**AND PROSPECTS** *by Philip W. Quigg,*  
*with commentary by J. S. F. Botha, Kenneth*  
*Carstens, Vernon McKay*

**THE MORALITY AND POLITICS**

**OF INTERVENTION** *by Manfred Halpern*

**THE LIMITS OF NUCLEAR WAR**

*by Paul Ramsey*

### Other Titles

**THE MORAL DILEMMA OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS: ESSAYS FROM *worldview***

*William Clancy, Ed.* \$1.00

**PEACE, THE CHURCHES AND THE BOMB**

*James Finn, Ed.* \$2.00

**AN ALTERNATIVE TO WAR**

*by Gordon Zahn*

**MORAL TENSIONS IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS**

*by John C. Bennett*

**FOREIGN AID: MORAL AND POLITICAL**

**ASPECTS** *by Victor Ferkiss*

**JUST WAR AND VATICAN COUNCIL II:**

**A CRITIQUE** *by Robert W. Tucker, with*  
*commentary by George G. Higgins, Ralph*  
*Potter, Richard Cox, Paul Ramsey*

**COUNTERINSURGENCY:**

**SOME PROBLEMS AND IMPLICATIONS**

*by Edgar S. Furniss, Jr., with commentary by*  
*Charles Burton Marshall, William V. O'Brien*

**THE UNITED STATES IN ASIA:**

**EVOLUTION AND CONTAINMENT**

*by David P. Mozingo*

**NUCLEAR WEAPONS:**

**CAN THEIR SPREAD BE HALTED?**

*by Betty Goetz Lall* 50¢

**THE U.S. AND WARS OF NATIONAL LIBERATION: REPORT ON A SEMINAR**

*by Quentin L. Quade* 50¢

Quantity rates available