

"MORALITY AND FOREIGN POLICY"

Last month *Worldview* published an essay by John Courtney Murray, S.J. that strongly criticized the current "ambiguist" approach to problems of ethics and foreign policy and argued for a return to "the tradition of reason in moral affairs." In this issue *Worldview* presents extended comments on Father Murray's article by Kenneth W. Thompson and Hans J. Morgenthau. Dr. Thompson is the author of *Christian Ethics and the Dilemmas of Foreign Policy* and *Political Realism and the Crisis of World Politics*; Dr. Morgenthau is the author of *Dilemmas of Politics* and the forthcoming *The Purpose of America*.

THE PROBLEM OF MEANS

Kenneth W. Thompson

In "Morality and Foreign Policy" a distinguished Catholic theologian has raised a series of important issues that trouble him in the writings of political realists. Father John Courtney Murray should realize, however, that those he attacks are deeply troubled by many of the same issues. Unhappily, he falls prey early in his analysis to the very polemics he attributes to authors of "the new morality."

Thus Father Murray concentrates his attack on what he calls "an intramural argument going on within the Protestant community." This ignores a rich body of contemporary Catholic writing which is central to the tradition he is criticizing. The editors of *The Review of Politics*, for example, stand in the forefront of fulltime Catholic writers on international morality and they have their European counterparts. That Father Murray excludes their thought from his critique by implying that concern with the "ambiguity" of politics is a peculiarly Protestant obsession suggests that he is the doctrinaire, not those he describes in this way. Nor does he recognize the emphasis of Jewish writers like Will Herberg, Martin Buber or Hans J. Morgenthau, who are no less involved in the discussion.

More unsettling and disturbing in Father Murray's essay is an apparent blindness to the common problem of moral absolutes. Catholics no less than Protestants must confess that American society has viewed the present crisis in simple, unambiguous terms. There is much about the Cold War that is straightforward and unequivocal. Our policies have succeeded to the extent that we were called on to respond to aspects of the Communist threat which are similar if not identical with Nazism and Fascism.

The Truman Doctrine and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization have been designed to meet power with countervailing power through military assistance and alliances. Yet in the struggle for the respect of the uncommitted nations, more subtle and imaginative programs are needed. It is not enough in confronting these issues to say with many influential Catholic and other leaders that Communism alone is the real threat. These problems would perplex and baffle our leaders if Communism were suddenly to disappear.

Our approach to such issues has been impaired by the moral absolutism associated with McCarthyism. For this Catholics no less than Protestants must be held accountable, and it is hardly just of Father Murray to place the full burden on another faith by implying that abstract moralism is a peculiarly Protestant issue. Indeed, while many Catholics undoubtedly transcend the problem, moral absolutism for them is a yawning abyss of treacherous pitfalls from which only the wisest and most sophisticated are secure. Protestants, and especially those who are tireless in self-examination and self-criticism, must be tactless enough to point this out if Catholics are unwilling to recognize it.

The polemical character of Father Murray's argument is further illustrated by his patronizing discussion of "ambiguity." Now, the ambiguity of power is no invention of intellectuals but a basic problem inherent in political responsibility. No one who had faced the nearly intolerable choices with which statesmen are familiar could say with Father Murray's Olympian calm: "The dilemmas and ironies and paradoxes are . . . in the eye of the ambiguity beholder." One is tempted to reply that this is ultimate casuistry; it suggests that the harsh choices faced by responsible leaders are no more than artificial constructions which could be reduced to clear solutions through the use of pure reason, preferably the reason of Catholic natural law.

Yet what are we to say about the moral anguish of Lincoln confronted by the awful choice between freeing the slaves, preserving the Union and touching off the irrepressible conflict? How are we to think about that tragic and fatal alliance with the Soviet Union which made possible the defeat of Nazi Germany? What would the rationalist have offered the United States as an unambiguous policy for the Hungarian revolution? Or in the most recent crisis, what clear-cut policy guidance would a spokesman for "the tradition of reason" have offered President Eisenhower on accepting or not accepting responsibility for the U-2 incident?

In that fateful incident, Mr. Eisenhower, as the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee suggests, could have denied knowledge and responsibility for the flight. If he had chosen this course, however, he could scarcely have withstood pressure from Khrushchev and our allies at the Summit to accept the four conditions, including condemnation and punishment of the culprits who had practiced the black art of espionage. Yet the other choice, for which many of us were initially critical of the President, involved him in the defense of uncertain tactical measures that no head of state normally defends. As one of our wisest diplomatists points out, no one in Washington is happy over the handling of the spy plane incident, yet few if any are prepared to argue that he could have chosen another course less embarrassing or fraught with fewer difficulties.

Perhaps Father Murray, from the heights of his natural law position, could point the way to "reasonable" policies that would free our leaders from the "ambiguous" decisions they make. Short of offering a rational doctrine that could justify the use of force, however, Father Murray has been significantly silent about concrete problems and programs of action. Indeed, the most striking quality of his analysis is its studied avoidance of examples. The reader searches in vain for illustrations or "for instances" drawn from the real world. Like the social science theorist who erects an elaborate structure or system for decision-making or political choice and then declines to test his system against the real world, Father Murray exhorts and condemns from the safe haven of abstractions that make up a closed system with which no uninitiated outsider can come to terms.

Granted his premises, his conclusions follow. Given his assertions that a moral order englobes each political act, he is immune to criticism by those who would study the many-sided elements and ingredients in every political act. The world is seen as flat or round alternatively because natural law doctrine so decrees, not because one has made a genuine inquiry into the nature of politics.

However, the problem of Father Murray's criti-

cism is further compounded by the manner in which he caricatures his objects of scorn. For example, Father Murray satirizes: "To be human is bad enough; but to be powerful is to be corrupt, with a corruption that increases with each increment of power." What a gross distortion and corruption of sober thought and serious analysis! If Father Murray had the patience to follow the trend of the argument against which he declares a holy war, he would have framed his criticism in more moderate and balanced terms. He might have recognized that those whom he indicts point to the inextricable link between good and evil in human nature. Thus Reinhold Niebuhr begins his Gifford Lectures: "Man has always been his own most vexing problem. How shall he think of himself?"

This issue presents few if any difficulties for Father Murray, but for Niebuhr "every affirmation which [man] may make about his stature, virtue, or place in the cosmos becomes involved in contradictions." Niebuhr continues: "If he believes himself to be essentially good and attributes the admitted evils of human history to specific social and historical causes he involves himself in begging the question; for all these specific historical causes are revealed on close analysis to be no more than particular consequences and historical configurations of evil tendencies in man himself. If, on the other hand, man comes to pessimistic conclusions about himself, his capacity for such judgments would seem to negate the content of the judgments."

Surely this is a far cry from the conception of man Father Murray attributes to his "victims." Similarly, he caricatures the position serious writers have taken about the corruption of power. No one claims that corruption "increases with each increment of power." For some, power is a source of self-realization and fulfillment. Responsibility may produce qualities of mind and character which would otherwise be hidden. However the historians may ultimately judge President Harry Truman, few would deny that history and the demands of office called forth qualities of leadership that we had not anticipated. For some the fire is the means by which the metal is hardened and refined.

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Yet the pages of history are also littered with repeated examples of strong men who yielded to the temptations of power and became increasingly more arbitrary and persuaded of their own omniscience.

From Caesar to the present, the range of advisors contracts, counsel is sought only from agreeable colleagues, and criticism is cut off at its source as impatience and supreme self-confidence dominate. The argument of political realists simply stated is that power *tends* to be, not inescapably is, corrupting—

a lesson which the Founding Fathers grasped more fully, apparently, than Father Murray. After reading his easy dismissal of the problem of power, one wonders what he would say about our system of checks and balances, about federalism as a political invention and about the immense fear of arbitrary power that early American leaders share with more perceptive present-day observers.

But the Achilles heel of Father Murray's analysis is its lack of humility. At least his present essay is not humble about the problems of Catholic thought, about man himself, about the contradictions and irrelevancies in much of natural law doctrine in application to the contemporary international scene, nor about the writings to which by and large he does great violence. Those he criticizes in the Department of Defense who tremble at the prospect of firing the first shot are neither confused nor ambiguous (terms he reserves for Protestants and realists) "but simply wrong." The plain fact is that neither natural law nor practical reason provides a convincing justification for the employment of absolute force short of the contingent circumstances that might call it into play. Those who are finally called upon to press the button will be faced not with the need for a doctrine but with an overwhelmingly difficult choice that must be made—as was the decision to intervene in Korea—in the face of all the relevant circumstances.

At this point one is tempted to ask what "all the shooting is about." Father Murray in his stimulating essay on war (*Morality and Modern War*, The Church Peace Union, 1959) observes that moral principles must be filtered through circumstances if they are to have relevance for military policy. The same must be true of justice, freedom, security, general welfare and peace. This is precisely what those he criticizes have been attempting to do. To give meaning to the broad principles or categories, political leaders must reach down into the depths of American life and pluck out the concrete doctrines by which men can live. Justice is a general, intangible and often shapeless purpose, but Lincoln could give it meaning in the Emancipation Proclamation or the Supreme Court in the segregation cases. Writing about national purpose, Hans J. Morgenthau observes:

"The distinctiveness of the American purpose does not consist . . . in a particular substantive idea, a specific concrete arrangement, some single achievement, the consummation of which could be pinpointed in time. Rather it consists in the achievement of a particular mode of procedure, . . . way of thinking and acting in the social sphere, of a particular conception of the relations between the individual and society."

It is this procedural aspect of political morality, the routes by which justice and freedom are real-

ized, the institutional and practical measures that give it content and meaning, which are conspicuously missing from Father Murray's essay. In their stead he would substitute rational categories and pre-established structures which define national purpose. Hence he is impatient with any discussion that reminds him of a situational ethic, that involves the balancing of moral ends in the face of practical circumstances or that questions the sufficiency of obligatory political ends enshrined in natural law doctrine. Yet in his own analysis of the problems of war he returns himself to concepts that have been filtered through circumstances.

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Political concepts like freedom and equality, at least in the real world, are essentially formal concepts. They receive their meaning from the substantive concepts to which they relate. The question is endlessly raised, "freedom for what?" and at this point the political philosopher must search a higher order of political and moral ends like justice for which freedom and equality are regulatory principles. The Higher Law provided American politics with a faith and a set of beliefs about the dignity and worth of the individual and the purposes of man and society. Leaders had therefore to look beyond expediency and majority rule to a hierarchy of ends Americans sought to embody.

At the same time the Founding Fathers, having elevated their gaze, were obliged to return to earth to seek some crude approximation of goals in the murky realm of politics. Under changing circumstances, they realized justice in a shifting galaxy of public policies, each involving a balancing of ends and means. In the realm of politics, ambiguity and uncertainty, ambition and pride, selfishness and nobility intermingle and merge. Far from being an obstacle to action, awareness of this would seem to provide a challenge. Those who withdraw are rarely those who recognize the true character of the political realm. More likely those who expect a realm of reason and lofty purpose grow disillusioned and discouraged and vow to have no more of "this dirty business."

In my view, most of the great political and international leaders have been men who neither asked nor expected too much of their fellows. They accepted the world in all its richness, its blending of high purpose and tragic shortcomings. Some sensed instinctively the moral order within which men live and die while accepting the fact of evil and the need to adjust to it. They cooperated with evil when, as was often true, it promised to serve some good end. They discovered political justice not writ large on tablets of stone but in successive choices among partially good or barely tolerable alternatives. Some of them may have reflected on the greater security

of the philosopher's art. They may have envied the natural lawyer his discussion of justice and freedom at the same time they searched for some measure of both in the life of a complex society. If they achieved however modestly the goals about which philosophers write, they might be excused for feeling both gratitude and pride. They could be grateful to philosophers and lawyers who set the framework for a better life in terms of a more just society. They could feel pride in their own achievement which is not that of the philosopher and hardly deserves his scorn or denial.

THE DEMANDS OF PRUDENCE

Hans J. Morgenthau

An unbridgeable gulf separates the demands of Christian ethics from the way man is compelled by his natural aspirations to act. That conflict is fore-ordained by the nature of Christian ethics and the nature of man. Christian ethics demands love, humility, the abnegation of self; man as a natural creature seeks the aggrandizement of self through pride and power. It is the tragedy of man that he is incapable, by dint of his nature, to do what Christian ethics demands of him.

It is the guilt of man that he is unwilling, by dint of his corruption, to do what he could do to meet the demands of Christian ethics. The best man is capable of is to be guided by the vision of a life lived in compliance with the Christian code and to narrow the gap between his conduct and that code. The closing of that gap through complete harmony between the demands of Christian ethics and man's conduct is not a problem for ethics but for theology. Only divine grace can establish that harmony in another world.

What is true of man in general applies with particular force to political man. For the natural aspirations proper to the political sphere—and there is no difference in kind between domestic and international politics—contravene by definition the demands of Christian ethics. No compromise is possible between the great commandment of Christian ethics, "Love Thy Neighbor As Thyself," and the great commandment of politics, "Use Thy Neighbor As a Means To The Ends Of Thy Power." It is *a priori* impossible for political man to be at the same time a good politician—complying with the rules of political conduct—and to be a good Christian—complying with the demands of Christian ethics. In the measure that he tries to be the one he must cease to be the other.

No politician can accept the truth of that incompatibility; for it is exactly in the appearance of being moral while seeking power that he finds both peace of mind and an element of power itself. Few moralists have found that incompatibility palatable; for the reconciliation of the irreconcilable is intellectually more attractive and socially more rewarding than the radical postulation of alternatives. To face the conflict between ethics and politics squarely places an intolerable burden upon our actions or our consciences. Thus Western man has endeavored to obliterate the gap between the demands of Christian ethics and the aspirations of human nature by closing his eyes to it. He has reinterpreted the demands of Christian ethics by "liberalizing" them. He has made it appear as though the Christian gospel did not mean what it obviously says, and he has invented ingenious theological devices which make it easier to sin because they make forgiveness easy. He has watered down the demands of Christian ethics, thus making it appear as though human action were complying with these demands. This is the escape of the Pharisees.

The other escape is that of the Sophists. They approach the problem from the side of human action. They try to build a bridge between ethics and politics on the foundation of distorted human action rather than misinterpreted Christian ethics. Man is here presented as naturally good and human action as naturally moral; this is assumed to be true particularly of oneself and one's own action and of the collectivity to which one happens to belong and of its action. Here is the root of political ideology, the most persuasive attempt Western man has undertaken to make its peace with the demands of Christian ethics without having to forego his natural aspirations.

If there be any truth in this necessarily sketchy analysis, then the moral problem of politics resolves itself into the question: Given the existential incompatibility between politics and Christian ethics, how must moral man act in the political sphere? While he is precluded from acting morally, the best he can do is to minimize the intrinsic immorality of the political act. He must choose from among the political actions at his disposal the one which is likely to do the least violence to the commands of Christian ethics. The moral strategy of politics is, then, to try to choose the lesser evil.

This strategy, it should be added, is no more peculiar to politics than is the incompatibility between the demands of Christian ethics and the political aspirations of man. Both are special instances of the human condition; but they are particularly poignant instances by dint of the poignancy of the moral problem of politics. Yet as to choose the lesser evil is the best the moral politician can do, so it is also the best moral man at large can do.

It is at the point of choosing the lesser evil that moral evaluation and political calculation merge. For what is more or less morally evil must be determined through anticipation of the probable consequences of different courses of action. Obviously Father John Courtney Murray finds nuclear weapons "from the moral point of view . . . unshootable" because of the consequences of shooting them. A foreign policy that preserves peace is morally superior to one that leads to limited war, and the latter, in turn, is superior to one which increases the danger of all-out nuclear war. The right moral choice is here obviously identical with the right political choice. A foreign policy which seeks an avoidable limited war is morally inferior to one which actually avoids such a war. On the other hand, a foreign policy which shies away from the risk of limited war and thereby brings on all-out nuclear war is morally inferior to a foreign policy which faces that risk.

No one can be certain before the event which choice is morally right and politically sound. We all act on hunches which the future may or may not prove to have been correct. It is this uncertainty of both moral judgment and political calculation which creates those "ambiguities" and "dilemmas" which Father Murray so dislikes. These ambiguities and dilemmas were not invented by theologians, Protestant or otherwise, but they grow inevitably from the nature of the relationship between Christian ethics and political action. The ambiguities which we find baffling in the character of Hamlet, and the dilemmas with which he was unable to cope, were not peculiar to the prince of Denmark. They are but the ambiguities and the dilemmas which no morally sensitive actor on the political scene can escape.

This being so, recourse to natural law will not free us from these intellectual and moral disabilities. To the contrary, such recourse will only serve to emphasize their inevitability. For the gap between the rational postulates of natural law and the contingencies of the concrete situation within which man must act and judge is just as wide as the gulf which separates the demands of Christian ethics from the rules of political action. In truth, as a more detailed discussion of natural law and its relation to ethics would show, both gaps are identical. Natural law can only provide us with the gen-

eral principles of right action. It cannot tell us with any degree of certainty which of alternative actions is the right one in a concrete situation. That choice natural law leaves to prudential considerations—strangely enough, there is no reference to prudence in Father Murray's argument—that is, to our intellectually fallible minds and morally weak wills. And those minds and wills put us again in the presence of the ambiguities and dilemmas.

I join Father Murray in deploring the decline of the tradition of natural law in America, the weakening of those objective rational standards which once gave guidance to private and public judgments and actions. However, it is not secular liberalism alone which ought to be blamed for that decline. Defenders of natural law must share in that responsibility. For natural law has been intellectually and politically discredited in good measure because it has been made to bear a burden which it could not carry. The attempts to apply natural law directly, without the intermediary of prudence, to political action were bound to fail. Either they provided no guide to political action because of the generality of natural law to which we have referred, or else they provide a particular political position with an ideological rationalization and justification. Thus the appeal to natural law became either meaningless or suspect.

I should say in passing that Father Murray has failed to do justice to the recent debate which has centered on the problem of morality and foreign policy. This has been by and large a serious and fruitful debate. It has deepened and refined the understanding of both politics and morality. I know of no evidence, with the exception of some off-hand remarks by one author, to suggest that "to the political realists or cynics . . . all public issues are simply issues of power in which moral judgments have no place at all." And I must have expressed myself consistently with extreme imprecision if to Father Murray (*Morality and Modern War*, p. 21) my "basic view . . . seems to be that all moralities are purely 'national'; they cannot be subjected to judgment in terms of universal principles." I have tried to express the exactly opposite view for more than fifteen years. I have particularly pointed to "national moralities" as political ideologies which endeavor to invest the interests of a particular nation with the sanction of universal moral principles.

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