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CHRISTIANITY AND PACIFISM: A REPLY TO KELLENBERGER

Selmer Bringsjord

In a recent issue of *Faith and Philosophy*, James Kellenberger argues that the “ethics of love” aspect of Christianity entails pacifism. In response, I present an argument designed to show that Christian doctrine entails the *falsity* of pacifism. I go on to show, however, that the *spirit* of Kellenberger’s point may survive, for perhaps Christ’s teaching regarding “mental sin” prohibits the war-related activity known as nuclear deterrence.

In a recent issue of *Faith and Philosophy*, James Kellenberger defends pacifism, and along the way argues that Christianity, because it includes an “ethics of love,” entails pacifism.¹ I think Kellenberger is wrong about this entailment. Indeed I think the immemorial debate about whether or not Christian doctrine entails pacifism is resolved by way of a straightforward argument which shows that Christian doctrine entails the *falsity* of pacifism.² However, there *is* a less tractable and more interesting debate regarding Christianity and war-related activity—one centered around the moral status of *nuclear deterrence* in light of Christ’s teaching that so-called “mental” acts can be full-fledged sins.

I. Preliminaries

The short length of this paper precludes furnishing precise definitions of pacifism and Christian doctrine.³ But I think I can supply a couple of rough-and-ready characterizations sufficient for the task at hand.

Broadly speaking, I view Christian doctrine as a set, call it ‘C,’ of declarative sentences, or propositions.⁴ There are no doubt certain paradigmatic elements of C: for example, that there is an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent being who created all contingent things, that Christ’s teachings are important, and that one ought to love God and humankind. And there are certain controversial propositions which some may want to include in C, while others may want to keep out—say that God created all contingent things in six solar days. About this particular proposition I have nothing to say, but there are certain other particular propositions, expressed in Scripture, which I’ll want to place in C. Exactly *which* biblical propositions I need will be made clear below.



Pacifism, denoted by '(P),' will simply be the thesis that

- (P) For every agent S, if S wages war, then S does something which is morally impermissible.⁵

I'm confident that Kellenberger, indeed every proponent of a thesis called 'pacifism,' will affirm (P), because (P) is about the weakest expression of pacifism I can think of.⁶

II. *Christian Doctrine Entails The Falsity of Pacifism*

In order to show that C entails not-(P) I offer a simple but nonetheless powerful argument, (A1). In order to articulate (A1) I first need a conceptual truth regarding omnibenevolence (=moral perfection), *viz.*

- (O) For every agent S, if S is omnibenevolent, then it's not the case that S does something which is morally impermissible.

To complete the background needed to prove that C implies not-(P), consider the following two propositions:

- (B1) God is omnibenevolent.
(B2) God wages war.

(B1) is clearly a member of C.⁷ And so, I would claim, is (B2). But then we have it: a straightforward proof that C entails not-P, one version of which is a trivial *reductio* running as follows. Suppose that Christian doctrine is true (=that the members of C are true); then (B1) and (B2) are true. Suppose also for contradiction that (P) is true. It follows from (B1) and (O) that it's not the case that God does something which is morally impermissible. But it follows from (B2) and (P) that God does something which is morally impermissible—contradiction. Hence if C then not-(P), as desired.

What can be said about this little argument? Are things really as easy as they seem? Well, the argument is surely formally valid. And (O) is a necessary truth. This leaves just (B1) and (B2), or, put more precisely, this leaves the proposition that (B1), (B2) are elements of C. But since one-half of this proposition is unexceptionable (the half according to which (B1) is in C), we're left with one vulnerable premise: that (B2) is in C.

So, is (B2) in C? Is it part of Christian doctrine that God wages war? I think anyone willing to concede that (i) many of the members of C come from the Scriptures, and (ii) the Scriptures ought to be taken literally to *some* degree, must admit that (B2) is in C. For the Scriptures are filled with descriptions of a massive war pitting God and godly agents against Satan and satanic agents.⁸

There are, of course, objections that can be brought against (A1). I'll consider two, the first of which can be extracted from Kellenberger's statement that

. . . pacifism does not require an utter renunciation of force. Pacifists without violating their pacifism may for instance forcibly interrupt an assault: the rejection of violence does not require one to refrain from staying the hand of a person who is beating another. Such forceful action remains nonviolent in the relevant sense. Here we encounter a distinction that I take to be crucial for pacifism: the distinction between morally allowable force and violence, which is not morally allowable.⁹

The objection against (A1) to be derived from this quote is that strictly speaking God isn't guilty of violence against evil and the agents of evil; rather he is using allowable force.

Why does this objection fail?¹⁰ It fails for the simple reason that on Kellenberger's account God uses violence. That He does follows from (B2) and the proposition that

(*) If S wages war, then S uses violence,

where (*) can be extracted from Kellenbergerian passages such as

How does this affect my claim that war involves, not [allowable] force, but violence? It leaves the claim intact, I believe. It does because it remains that in war the enemy are viewed with hostility or even as dehumanized, which is not to consider their good . . . war by its nature requires each side to treat the other with at least hostility, which is at once not to act out of consideration for their good and to violate their right to be treated as persons.

It may be thought that Kellenberger could say that what he *meant* to affirm wasn't (*), but rather

(**) If S wages war, then, unless in so waging S has regard for his enemy's good, S uses violence.

But this move isn't open to Kellenberger.¹¹ For to make it is to open a door he wants at all costs to keep closed: he doesn't want to let in real-life human war which is permitted by pacifism. Replacing (*) with (**) would leave the pacifist vulnerable to sincere claims like "That we have to go to war against N is unfortunate. But for the good of the citizens of N, who are living under a misguided political system, we must do it."¹²

What's the second objection that could be brought against (A1)? It's this: (P) shouldn't be taken to range over both human *and* divine agents, but only over human agents; it should thus read

(P') For every *human* agent S, if S wages war, then S does something which is morally impermissible.

With (P) replaced by (P'), (A1) can't get off the ground.

The chief problem with this objection is that it appears to be completely *ad hoc*: It would seem that my opponent moves to (P') solely to evade (A1). Can a cogent rationale for moving to (P') be found? Perhaps. One candidate runs as follows. The reason why (P) ought to be restricted to human agents is (roughly) that when God wages war he knows *exactly* what He's doing. Human agents, on the other hand, because they are often guilty of mistaken moral judgement, and often miscalculate the consequences of their actions, must refrain from violence.

Unfortunately, whatever intrinsic merit this rationale has, it isn't viable for Kellenberger, and I don't think it's viable for any genuine pacifist. Why? Because the driving force behind pacifism is one that isn't deflected by a war-wager being right. This point can perhaps be made by way of a simple thought-experiment. Suppose that S*, a non-human but intelligent (self-conscious, free, . . .) agent on another planet declares his intention to wage war against S; and suppose S* correctly believes that S, or nearly all of the citizens of S, are engaged in evil activity; and suppose also that S* is correct in thinking that a war (say, as bloody as ours tend to be) with S will end S's evil activity. Would the pacifist hesitate to condemn the alien S*? I don't think so.

Perhaps there are other ways to motivate (P'), but I have a hard time seeing what they could be. The thrust of pacifism, it seems to me, ranges over all agents.

I conclude, then, that (A1) is a formidable case for the thesis that Christian doctrine entails the falsity of pacifism. At the very least (A1) shifts the burden of proof over to those who hold that C is consistent with (P), and thus also over to those who, like Kellenberger, hold that C *entails* (P).¹³

III. Nuclear Deterrence and Christ's Position on Mental Sins

It's notoriously difficult to show that nuclear deterrence, hereafter just ND, is morally impermissible. But many of those who find pacifism attractive will no doubt oppose ND on moral grounds. And perhaps these thinkers can find some support for their attitude in Christ's teachings about what might be called *mental* sin. Let me be a bit more specific.

Consider the following attempt, argument (A2), to show ND morally wrong:

- (1) ND is a policy in which an agent S, the agent seeking to deter, intends to launch a retaliatory nuclear strike against S', the enemy, should S' launch a nuclear strike.
- (2) Launching a retaliatory nuclear strike is morally wrong.

Therefore:

- (3) ND is a policy in which S intends to perform a morally wrong action should S' launch a nuclear strike.

(B*) If an agent S intends to perform a morally wrong action, then S performs a morally wrong action.

Therefore:

(4) ND is a policy in which S performs a morally wrong action.¹⁴

Is (A2) sound? Well, premise (1) is unquestionable since it reflects (albeit simplistically) the very structure of ND. Premise (2) certainly *seems* true, since it seems morally wrong to do something which will kill, maim, and torture millions of innocents. But premise (B*), what we might call the *bridge principle* from intention to action—this premise is a different story. Depending on who’s doing the glancing, (B*) may seem at first glance obviously true or obviously false. I happen to think it’s obviously false. Why? Because of counter-examples like this one: Some fiendish but technologically advanced sadists kidnap you and hook up to your brain a device which reads off your intentions. Assume that you are morally better than Mother Theresa: you’ve never done anything wrong to this point, and when these sadists let you go you’ll continue to live a sinless life. Now the sadists put you in a nasty dilemma: they say that unless you can form the intention to kill an innocent person they will kill one million innocents. Assume they are utterly honest and that you know this.

In this situation, if you happen to be of a sort that can manufacture intentions at will, if you form the intention to kill an innocent person in order to save a million innocents, I would say that you *don’t* do anything morally wrong.

But this is only a slippery thought-experiment, not a knockdown counter-example to (B*), and so searching for other relevant data is worthwhile. And I would claim that perhaps one aspect, perhaps the distinctive aspect, of Christ’s ethical teaching is a relevant datum.

The aspect I have in mind may be found in Matthew 5:27,28 (NAS):

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery”; but I say to you, that every one who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.

Though I’m no Bible scholar, I would guess that we would be within our rights to say about this passage that Christ is speaking not just about adultery, but about all sin. I would claim that the central point of His teaching would be conveyed as well, or at any rate nearly as well, if it read

You have heard it was said, “You shall not commit murder”; but I say to you, that every one who looks on a person to murder her has committed murder already in his heart.

If I’m right about this, it’s a fair question to ask how exactly we can generalize

from Christ's teaching. In preparation for answering this question let's assume that we know what it means to say that an agent *mentally carries out* an action.¹⁵ Then I would generalize from Christ's teaching to

- (M) If S at time *t* wants to do some action *a* at *t'*,¹⁶ and S mentally carries out *a* at *t*, and doing *a* is morally wrong, then S, by so wanting and mentally carrying out, does something morally wrong at *t*.

And (M), when conjoined with a very plausible principle regarding "occurrent"¹⁷ intention, implies (B*). The plausible principle is

- (I) If S intends at *t* to do *a* at *t'*, then S both wants at *t* to do *a* at *t'* and mentally carries out *a* at *t*.

So now if (M) is in C, and (I) is true along with the other premises in (A2), do we have sound argument that ND is morally wrong? Have we shown that while Christian doctrine entails the falsity of pacifism, the spirit of pacifism survives in an opposition to ND by virtue of Christ's teachings? Not quite. For (A2), as some have doubtless noticed, is formally invalid: (4) doesn't follow from (3) and (B*).¹⁸ Yet it's not hard to repair (A2): to do so just replace (B*) with

- (B**) If an agent S intends to perform a morally impermissible action *a* should S' perform an action *a'*, then S performs a morally impermissible action.

Is the new argument to which this replacement gives rise sound? If counter-examples of the sort I gave above fail against (B**), Christ's teaching on mental sin, via slightly different versions of (M) and (I), may very well be a deciding factor. Perhaps Christ's message is so stringent that even a conditional intention like that possessed by S in (B**) is morally wrong. On the other hand perhaps not. My aim here was to *start* a debate, not start and *resolve* it. Resolution will have to wait for another paper, and perhaps it won't be mine.

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NOTES

1. James Kellenberger, "A Defense of Pacifism," *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 4, no. 2, April 1987.
2. If I'm successful, the corollary is of course that Christian doctrine doesn't imply pacifism, on the assumption that Christian doctrine is consistent.
3. I don't mean to imply conversationally that I could, if given enough time, provide precise definitions of pacifism and Christian doctrine.

4. I happen to think that this view of Christian doctrine isn't too simplistic. Many will doubtless disagree (because for example they will hold that part of Christian doctrine is composed of truths which aren't propositions). But my approach should be acceptable for purposes of easing exposition.

5. Most versions of pacifism will be stronger than this. (Stronger versions might include a modal operator, or might include the concept of *absolutely* morally impermissible, or might imply that it's the waging of war which is morally impermissible, etc.) I can get by with something as weak as (P). Notice that I'm assuming that individuals wage war, rather than nations or ruling bodies. This seems a harmless simplification in the present context.

6. To say the P is the weakest rendition is to say, roughly, that it implies no other rendition but is implied by every other rendition.

7. Implicit in this paper is a fairly orthodox view of C. In some heterodox views, I'm sure, God isn't thought to be omnibenevolent. Indeed in some heterodox views God isn't even an agent. This is as good a place as any to point out that the orthodox view of C carries over to a rather orthodox view regarding the Scriptures. There will be those who take the Bible's reference to spiritual war to be completely figurative. (A1) will of course leave such people profoundly unimpressed.

8. Readers wanting verses have only to consult Nave's Topical Bible under the heading 'War.'

9. Kellenberger, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

10. It might be thought to fail simply because, as it stands, it doesn't imply the falsity of any premise in (A1). I'm granting for the sake of argument that this objection could be tied explicitly to (A1).

11. Kellenberger essentially precludes this move in the quote just supplied, when he says "... war by its nature requires each side to treat the other with at least hostility."

12. The debate here can continue—perhaps interminably. Kellenberger, again in an attempt to close the door on permissible human war, might replace (**) with

(***) If S wages war, then, unless in so waging S has regard for his enemy's good and in so waging S will procure his enemy's good, S uses violence.

And then he could go on to point out that God *will* procure his enemy's good. My reply would be that (***) still leaves the door open, because it just might be, for all we know, that statements of the above sort regarding nation N will be correct; and so, for any such given statement, a pacifist must reserve moral judgement.

13. Since of course if P entails Q then P is consistent with Q.

14. I take (4) to be essentially the same proposition as 'ND is morally wrong.'

15. This assumption is a very reasonable one. In order to mentally carry out, say, eating a ham sandwich, just imagine yourself holding one in your hand and gradually eating it.

16. It's assumed that *t* is earlier than or simultaneous with *t'*.

17. I've been presupposing throughout this paper that 'intention' is short for 'occurrent intention.' You probably intend now to eat something tomorrow, but this isn't an occurrent intention. On the other hand, if you disagree with what I'm saying in this paper and plan to send me your objections, you have an occurrent intention to write to me.

18. In order to verify this one has only to formalize (A2) in first-order logic.