

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 11
Number 1 *Parameters* 1981

Article 1

7-4-1981

MORALITY AND THE PRESENT PERIL

William Barrett

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>

Recommended Citation

William Barrett, "MORALITY AND THE PRESENT PERIL," *Parameters* 11, no. 1 (1981), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.1236.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

MORALITY AND THE PRESENT PERIL

by

WILLIAM BARRETT

For some time a fragment of an imaginary conversation has been running through my mind; it goes something like this: My grandson asks me, "Grandfather, what were you doing before we capitulated to the Russians?" And I answer, "Grandson, I was debating the logical niceties of war and morality among my philosopher colleagues." With the way things are now going, the speed with which the balance of power is tilting against us, I may not have to wait for my grandson to ask the question.

All philosophical and moral questions are carried in the context of our actual situation. When the actuality is benign, we tend to forget it, and we seem free for a while to spin our hypothetical and contra-factual cases in the thin air of abstraction. But even in such cases of ease and relaxation we proceed at our peril if we forget this fact of actuality; the actual situation must always be part of our human context. The options we face in life—the big ones—as William James reminded us, are usually forced options, ones we wouldn't face at all if we didn't have to. In the present case, in the situation of the world as it now stands, this actuality is so urgent and threatening that we could not forget it if we wanted to, though I must admit that a good deal of philosophical discussion often seems to take place as if that actuality never existed.

Two predominant conditions define our present situation in the world today. First is the fact that the United States is confronted by an implacable enemy in the form of the

Soviet Union. This enemy, moreover, is not a nation-state in any traditional sense and is not to be dealt with wholly within the framework of traditional diplomacy, despite the naivete of some of our officials. How can you enter into reliable agreements with a state that for the more than 60 years of its existence has not dealt even minimal justice to its own citizens? Further, as a communist state, it is the spearhead and leading power of international communism. The American people and most of their politicians still do not understand the nature of communism. Perhaps only ex-Marxists or those dissidents who have lived under Marxist rule grasp it. But this brief article is not the occasion to dwell on that fact. Since our subject here is morality, or touches on morality, suffice it to say that the communist state is an evil, an oppressive blight on the human spirit, organized with all the apparatus and weapons of the modern age. This evil thing, furthermore, is committed to our destruction. That ultimate hostility is both a part of communist doctrine and a necessity for it in practice. The communist state cannot stand long beside the capitalist world in peaceful coexistence and competition. The discrepancy becomes too glaring. "West Berlin," Khrushchev remarked, "sticks like a bone in my throat." Why? It was not a military threat. Quite simply, the contrast between East and West at that focal point was too uncomfortable and shocking. In the same sense, the United States sticks like a bone in the throat of the whole communist world. So far as the communists are concerned, the bone has to be eliminated.

The second overriding fact in our actual situation is the presence of nuclear weapons. It might have been well if such weapons had never been invented, or invented only after humanity had become morally mature and the planet was at peace. (But there one begins to drift off into hypotheticals—which, alas, is so easy to do.) The facts are that these weapons exist, we have them, and the other side has them. In this situation any option we elect is bound to be a forced option. What to do then? As moral individuals pursuing the moral aspect of the matter, we naturally think of these weapons and the awful havoc they will wreak if ever used, and we recoil. Why not renounce them altogether? That would seem to be the clearcut way to moral purity, perhaps even sanctity (though we might remember there have been saints among the warriors as well as the peacemakers).

The answer to the foregoing question, obviously, is that the other side would not follow suit and our unilateral disarmament would, in fact, be capitulation. Of course, as has been suggested by some, we could follow the path of passive resistance in the manner of Gandhi in India; in due time, and without the destruction of nuclear war, liberty might slowly and painfully reappear upon this earth. Such was the rationale, when any was offered, behind the slogan “Better red than dead” when it first gained currency in the 1950’s. The example of Gandhi’s passive resistance, however, would not be altogether relevant to that future situation of capitulation. Gandhi was dealing with British rulers bound by their own traditional moral compunctions and sense of fair play; he was not dealing with an implacable communist regime. Furthermore, the British rule was already there when Gandhi began his crusade; he did not invite the British in by capitulation in order then to practice passive resistance against them.

If not capitulation, then, the only other choice open to us is resistance. Indeed, if we are concerned with the morality of the matter, there should be no doubt of the propriety of this option. In the face of so grim an evil, so distorting of the human mind

and spirit, our duty would plainly be to resist with all the energy and powers we command. But—and this point must be emphasized—a token or half-hearted resistance would be equivalent to capitulation. We are brought up abruptly at this point by the unpleasant reality of nuclear weapons. If we are not to capitulate, it follows that we do not renounce these weapons. What then? Do we sit on the stockpiles of nuclear weapons as our deterrent? The other side is not proceeding so passively. Those in the Soviet high command pursue a strategy other than mere deterrence. Their war plans envisage a nuclear war as a war that they can successfully wage and win. Because of the greater dispersion of their cities and population, and because the communist leaders are willing to accept a rate of civilian casualties far in excess of what we would find tolerable, they calculate that nuclear war could provide them a significant comparative advantage.

We can thus expect that someday the following scenario might be enacted: During a certain crisis in our relations with the Soviet Union—say, something like the Cuban missile crisis in 1962—their leader approaches our president and declares, “We are ready for atomic war, are you?” At this point the American president backs down, and the first step in our surrender has been taken. Here, terrorism seems to have become a principle of

William Barrett, former Professor of Philosophy at New York University, was educated in philosophy at Columbia University, where he received his Ph.D. in 1939. His World War II service was with the US Navy. He taught philosophy at New York University for 29 years and was the Visiting Professor of Philosophy at the US Military Academy during academic year 1979-80. He was editor of the *Partisan Review* from 1945 to 1953 and served as book critic for the *Atlantic Monthly* for several years in the 1960’s.

Professor Barrett is the author of nine important books on such subjects as the history of philosophy, existentialism, and aesthetics. The present article is an edited version of a presentation by Professor Barrett before the War & Morality Symposium held at the US Military Academy, West Point, N.Y., 1-2 May 1980.



statecraft. Perhaps in this period of ubiquitous and random terrorism—the age of assassins prophesied so amazingly by the French poet Rimbaud in the 1890's—it is only proper, after all, that the terrorist philosophy should find its official embodiment and codification in a nation-state.

Yet, this terrorist aspect of the situation should not weaken, but in fact should strengthen, the force of the moral imperative that claims us, or that ought to claim us: the imperative, namely, that we resist the evil all the more when it shows its most violent side. But, just here, alas, tactical complexities of a moral as well as a military nature tend to becloud our sense of the basic imperative. There is a wise remark by Kant, one of his most profound, though philosophers in the hunt for more subtle matters tend to overlook it; Kant remarked that the honest citizen, the decent citizen, knows what his duty is—he does not have to learn it through the dialectic of philosophers. If this were not so, the moral life of mankind could not be carried on and the race would have long since foundered. I know that it is wrong to lie, without being required antecedently to settle all the tactical complications and circumstances in detail that lying or telling the truth in any given situation may bring with them. It would be regrettable, though I am sorry to say that it seems to have happened among some intellectuals, if those casuistical complexities were allowed to weaken the force of the original imperative; we would begin then, because we hadn't settled all the dialectical details, to question whether it was really wrong, after all, to lie. Now it is even more difficult to settle the intricate questions of what might constitute a just or unjust act of war in given situations. But does one have to resolve these questions in advance to know that tyranny and terror ought to be opposed?

In any actual situation the distinction between a first strike and a completely justified preemptive strike could be a very academic and formalistic question to settle. A terrorist appears in a plane brandishing a bomb, and holds the passengers captive. At a certain moment he turns away carelessly and I, happening to have a pocketknife handy,

stab him in the back and kill him. Afterward, one of the passengers, a young pedantic squirt, protests that the terrorist's back was turned and I really didn't have to kill him. In fact, we found out later that the bomb wasn't activated. But I doubt whether the young man's protests would win the sympathy of the other passengers. Now, in retrospect, I wonder—and I say "wonder," for I am just entertaining this question—whether the argument for a preventive war advanced in the late 1940's when the Soviets did not yet have the bomb—and advanced by, surprisingly enough, Bertrand Russell among others—I wonder whether the argument would appear so shocking to some of us now as we look back on it from this particular point in time. Of course, the whole occasion has vanished, but it makes an interesting topic for moral conjecture.

But, such conjecture aside, my main point comes back to that of Kant: we can know our moral duty in a certain situation without having resolved antecedently all the difficulties or complexities that may attend it, and we cannot let the deliberation upon these latter weaken our primary resolves. Details, of course, have to be attended to and if possible planned for. But he who enters any situation with a firm purpose is more likely to find that the details fall in place, and above all the opponent will know when he encounters that strength of purpose and will perforce respect it.

It is the morality of calculation that is more likely to find itself at sea in the details of the actual situation and in consequence become irresolute and infirm of purpose. The responsibility of the individual here and now, whether we call the present situation war or not, is to maintain this resoluteness and not to succumb to the spirit of appeasement that in so many subtle forms is now adrift throughout the land.

"So, dear Grandson, I come back to you at the end. It is my duty to do all in my power to make sure that the imaginary conversation spoken of at the beginning can never take place. In any case, if anything like it should, I could not be a party to it, for it would have to take place over my dead body!"