

Ethics of Nuclear Weapons.

In what I say, much can be extrapolated to apply also to chemical and biological weapons.

The Present Position:

There are estimated to be over 20,000 nuclear weapons in the world today. Were they all to be discharged it is conjectured that the result would be an equivalent to 1 million Hiroshimas. The International Court of Justice (the UN's highest legal body) stated in 1996 that the use or threat to use such weapons would breach the Hague Conventions, the Nuremberg Principles, the Geneva Conventions and the Genocide convention. Most states have long since pledged themselves to outlaw the use of nuclear weapons. This includes the UK govt. which signed the 1969 Non-Proliferation Treaty, pledging to pursue negotiations to end the nuclear arms race and to establish nuclear disarmament. Nevertheless today the UK spends annually £1.5 billion on Trident - each Trident submarine holds around 48 warheads, each warhead is seven times more powerful than that used at Hiroshima.

In this country, this ambiguous position, has been tested recently in a number of direct actions, the most famous of which, in 1999, saw 3 women acquitted of criminal damage (they had boarded a Trident related research vessel and destroyed a substantial quantity of MOD property). The presiding Scottish sheriff acquitted them on the grounds that their intention was to uphold international law, rather than to cause criminal damage. Yet a later Govt.-sought legal-response ruled, among other things, that damage to the military nuclear sector could not be legally justified on international legal-humanitarian grounds. As yet no Gov. around the world has put the case that the use or threat to use nuclear weapons can be legally justified.

The Background of the Moral Positions:

a) *offensive*

Nevertheless the retention of nuclear weapons has been buttressed by resort to moral arguments, to which we turn. [It should be said that most of the arguments were fashioned during the Cold War, and with the fall of the Soviet Union may well now have to be reappraisal - the literature at the moment does not do this]. It is virtually universally accepted that nuclear weapons are immoral if used *offensively*. The usage of strategic warheads would inevitably have massive effects upon innocents and the effects of fall-out would cause long-term health risks to future generations, and to neighbouring countries (think Chernobyl). Further, in a confrontation with a nuclear weapon possessing adversary, the first-strike usage of strategic nuclear weapons could not be morally granted since the adversary's nuclear retaliation would kill and injure innocents in one's own country.

b) *defensive*

Moral arguments thus focus on the possibility of a legitimate *defensive* use, what is termed the "nuclear deterrent". As this has been articulated since the 1950s, the nuclear deterrent expresses the intention to wreak such unacceptable destruction on an attacker as to render any attack worthless (indeed suicidal). 'Unacceptable destruction' here refers to, not just the threat to use these weapons against military targets, but entails the threat to destroy urban populations. Given that all nuclear weapons-possessing states have subscribed to the 'defensive' use of their weapons, the policy has been called 'Mutually Assured Destruction', and in practice would result in a process of city-swapping. At the heart of moral discourse then has been a focusing upon the issue of whether it is morally acceptable to *threaten* to kill innocents.

Consequentialism:

Much argumentation proceeds along what may be termed a *consequentialist* mode, i.e. calculating the consequences of different courses of action and upon that deciding for the least worst course of action. For example, it could be argued that the threat against an enemy's civilian population, though an evil, is a lesser evil than full-scale nuclear war. Various permutations of this position appeal to issues of intention and double-effect: it is not our *intention* to cause nuclear war and bring innocent suffering - on the contrary in assuring no one side can dominate the other, the development of an effective nuclear weapons system guarantees (in a rational world) that neither side will launch a nuclear attack. Supplementing such an approach might be a critique of unilateral disarmament: the consequence of disarmament might be to lay oneself open to nuclear blackmail and international tyranny which might threaten our cherished traditions of freedom, democracy and civil liberties. At the root of this form of consequentialist position is a fear that being tyrannized by more powerful enemies is more likely if one does not possess nuclear weapons (i.e. better dead than Red - or fundamentalist Muslim, or whatever). Or to put it another way mutually assured destruction has helped us to avoid nuclear war so far and preserved freedoms. Such a position might also be claimed to be combinable with some form of careful, balanced multilateral disarmament.

On the other hand it is possible to construct an entirely alternate consequentialist position, one form of which would be to argue that it would be better to be Red - or under Saddam Hussein's thumb - than dead, since the consequences of the nuclear deterrent are too unstable: it leads to arms races (viz Pakistan and India), perpetuates international suspicions, is dangerous and costly and could destroy the world. Alternately, one could argue that the deterrent has not even brought peace: the history of the Cold War, for example, has seen conflicts generated by NATO - Soviet antipathy but played out around the world in Asia, Africa and Latin America and where the threat of nuclear retaliation has prevented the defence of countries against imperialist aggression (thus the US could blockade Cuba and intervene in El Salvador, whilst the Soviets could overrun Hungary and annex Afghanistan and no-one could easily uphold justice in either direction). Thus, disarming unilaterally might have the consequence of making the world a safer place.

Moral Absolutism:

Consequentialist decision-making in this area does not provide clear answers - nor perhaps can it since such a methodology is precisely not *about* morality but about cost-benefit analysis. Such analysis works ideally only with well-defined goals, comparable costs in a defined unit term, quantifiable and comparable benefits, and is ultimately agnostic about any particular means employed to achieve a given end. By contrast moral reasoning is typically concerned with imprecise goals such as human well-being or the virtuous life, with values and disvalues which are diverse and non-quantifiable, with benefits which are non-quantifiable and non-comparable. A moral position is one which is precisely concerned with the *means* to a particular end.

The consequentialist cleft stick has therefore led some thinkers to a reassertion of moral absolutes. If it is generally enshrined in law and popular conscience that the killing of innocents is always wrong then nuclear weapons, used even defensively, would be considered immoral. In this case it would not be enough to argue that one is morally justified in retaining a nuclear capability if one *hoped* not to have to use them (that possessing nuclear weapons was a moral 'neutral'), since ultimately in developing, maintaining and planning for their use one is always entertaining their possible use, one is *already* in a sense accepting that one *can* use them. In absolutist moral terms: when the buck stops, will it find us being willing to kill the innocent, or find us willing to forgo nuclear weapons at possibly enormous cost

(a latter possibility that although it might not necessarily prevent self-defense by conventional warfare, might ultimately choose to value innocent lives over cherished values, like freedom).

Technologism:

Aside from consequentialism and costly moral absolutism, another answer has been offered: a technological answer. Recent US policy has championed a space based anti-ballistic missile system which it is asserted would render the US and its allies defensible from nuclear attack. Will such an advance solve our moral dilemma by rendering nuclear weapons obsolete? So it is hoped, but if one group of states achieve impregnability it may well be at the expense of other nations becoming naked to attack since whatever protection mutually assured destruction originally offered will be done away with. This might lead us to a new arms race and the militarisation of space. Such a technological answer might prove to be no answer, but merely a raising of the stakes to a more perilous level. Perilous because satellites are delicate objects and how would one distinguish a natural malfunction from an attempt to destabilise one's Star-Wars satellite prior to a preemptive attack? Technology may only provide part of an answer: a global form of Star-Wars protecting all nations from nuclear attack, or the sharing of such technology could be proposed (although at present is not) - but such a sharing still takes us back to the traditional moral domain. We seem to return to a fundamental question how do we establish security, through mutual trust or through mutual suspicion? It would seem whatever answer we choose, we cannot do so without some form of cost. Such a cost might not merely be an obvious one, as one group of writers put it "when one chooses a certain course of action, one [also] determines oneself to be a certain kind of person". What type of people do we strive to be?