

VIRTUE, MORALITY, AND EXPEDIENCY

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There has been much discussion on the local list-serve, vision2020.moscow.com, about morality and the War on Terror. Some have argued that even though innocents may be tortured and killed, the terrorist risk is so great that Bush's aggressive actions are morally justified.

Those who argue this view offered the example of the bombing of Japan and Germany, which killed hundreds of thousands of civilians but in the end saved the lives of several million. But surely these were not moral acts; they were simply expedient means to win a military victory.

One "2020 Visionary" claimed that capital punishment was still morally justified even after over 100 of those executed have now been exonerated. There are still many people who believe that the death penalty prevents future murders, even though hundreds of studies since 1830 have proved that it does not. Again the argument is one from expediency not morality. For more read www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/deathpenalty.htm.

I will prove my point with a simple example. Let's say that someone attacks me and is threatening my life. Let's also say that I am armed and that I kill my attacker. Killing this person violates basic morality. I have committed a wrong and I would feel terribly guilty about it. The fact that the law would clear me because it was a justified killing in self-defense does not in any way remove the moral fact that I've done wrong.

Let's say that I'm watching a Vandal game with my friend Tom in my backroom. Let's also say that a homicidal maniac comes to door armed with an AK-47. The man says that he has read Tom's posts on Vision 2020 and that he deserves to die. The terrorist also states that he has good information that Tom is at my house. I quickly make up a big fat lie and say that Tom is not at my house and was never my friend. Somehow I convince him and the brute goes away.

My friend is safe, but I've broken the rule about truth telling. Lying to save a friend's life is an expedient act, but it has no moral value. All people of conscience recognize this, and they would repent because of this.

This example, I believe, shows the superiority of virtue ethics. Honest people have developed a strong disposition to tell the truth. This moral habit is a virtue. The fact that this unusual situation has forced me to tell a lie does not make me a liar. Far from it: after this ordeal I immediately return to my habit of truth telling.

Rule based ethics would say that I have broken a rule, but virtue ethics says that virtues are supreme and that moral imperatives and moral prohibitions are simply abstractions from the virtues and the vices. There are exceptions to rules, but there is no substitute for persons of good character and virtue.

There are some philosophers who believe that Buddhism has a utilitarian ethics. The Doctrine of Expedient Means gives them good reason for this proposal. For example, the loving father in the *Lotus Sutra* lies to his children in order to get them to leave a burning house, symbolic of the fire of craving. More problematic is the belief in one Buddhist school that Bodhisattvas (=saints) may kill persons who will, if not stopped, murder others in the future. In my own work I have argued that the best way to interpret the Buddha's ethics is from a virtue perspective. See www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/307/buddve.htm

Using evil means to justify a desired end can be called "good" only if you are crass utilitarian who holds that as long as there is more pleasure than pain in your action, then you are acting morally. I once saw a great utilitarian maxim on a 3rd floor washroom wall in the UI Administration Building. The toilet scrivener had written: "A long war is a small price to pay for eternal peace."

This is theological utilitarianism gone wacko, but if you grant the assumptions the pleasure far outweighs the pain. The righteous victors will enjoy infinite pleasure, and this will always trump any amount of finite pain committed in all righteous wars on earth.

So let us all embrace the religious zealots of our choice and kill all the unbelievers because remember "a long war for God is a small price to pay for eternal peace." Sadly, there are some people out there that actually believe this, and for this, we should be very, very concerned.

Postscript for Christmas 2006. There is a new video game out for Christian children this year. It is based on the infamous *Left Behind* book series. Players can

choose to be Christian militia members who patrol the streets of New York City at the time of the Rapture. The militia kids can give non-believers a choice: they can repent and give themselves to Jesus, who appears in the clouds above them, but if they refuse the offer they can be gunned down. For more information see <http://www.defconamerica.org>.