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PHILOSOPHY AND THE RESOLUTION OF INTERNATIONAL CONFLICTS

This conference is funded, ultimately, by the National Endowment for the Humanities. I am an academic. To me the term "humanities" first calls to mind those departments or disciplines listed in the division of humanities in a university. Philosophy is one of these. Thus, one thing I want to talk about is the relevance, or lack of relevance, of the discipline of philosophy to conflict resolution in international politics. But the title of our conference also speaks of "humanist values" in foreign policy. This suggests something vaguer, but less academic. It suggests something to do with values which inhere in human beings, as human beings, quite apart from any particular academic discipline. I think that these two concepts - of philosophy as a discipline, and of humanistic values relating to all mankind - are rather closely related.

We come to this conference in a desperate state of mind. We live in a world where nations are spending well over 300 billion dollars a year on weapons which could destroy us all - more than they spend on education, or on health and much more than they spend on peace. We wonder whether humanist values will all go up in smoke; whether we will ever see the year 2000. The urgency of the situation makes questions about contributions philosophers could make seem misplaced. Surely we need the knowledge of historians and economists, of students of cultures and political systems, perhaps even of social psychology and pathology. But have we time enough left to consider the relevance of philosophy?

Philosophy has always been considered by practical men of little use. Philosophy bakes no bread it is said. And even Plato wrote that the critic is quite right "in calling the best sort of philosophers useless to the public". But he added that the blame for this must be put on those who make no use of philosophers, not on philosophers themselves. (Republic VI, 489)

Let us pause a moment to ask what philosophy is.

The discipline of philosophy has three main branches: the study of knowledge and logical reasoning, the study of ethics and value theory, and metaphysics, or the search for ultimate reality. Until recently, in Western Philosophy, the dominant question was the latter. In the nineteenth century as in most of the centuries before it, philosophers battled to establish this or that view about the ultimate nature and structure of reality. Materialists and idealists, Thomists and Hegelians, theists and atheists, argued mightily to show that each had the true and absolute truth. Contemporary philosophers, in the western "free democracies" at least, are much more concerned with the former two branches which involve the ways in which human beings arrive at beliefs or knowledge, and the ways in which human beings evaluate or make moral judgments. Philosophy has always sought universal principles and concepts, rather than particular provincial ones. But now it has tended to give up on the possibility of establishing one or another metaphysical world-view as absolute truth; viewing such matters as almost matters of individual choice. It has not, however, given up on its concern for methods of rational argument and belief formation, including methods of handling ethical decisions. The logic philosophy seeks knows no national boundaries and reflects no racial, sexual or cultural pecularities. The ethical

principles it searches for are ones which presuppose no cultural norms, no geographical boundaries, and no favored religious authorities or rituals or creeds. Its concern is with universal, not local, aspects of reasoning and ethics; and it's concerned with humanistic values, for reasoning and ethical decision-making are pre-eminently human activities.

In the anarchic field of international relations - of conflicts of sovereign nations who admit no higher legal authority than their own laws and interests - the contribution philosophy might make seems at first close to the vanishing point. Is it small wonder that practical men think philosophy of little use in international affairs? For surely the practical reality - particularly in international conflicts - is that we must recognize and assess realistically the particular military capacities and economic strength or weakness, of the contending parties; their particular individual and national interests, their embedded religious prejudices, their historical prides and sensitivities, the eccentric whims of their national leaders, the racial conflicts, the cultural mores, the nationalisms, the particular heroes and mythologies. These are the factors, we are told, which lead to the conflicts. These are the factors which must be dealt with - diplomatically, cautiously, sometimes deviously and manipulatively - if we are to resolve international conflicts rather than exacerbate them. How useless and ineffective it seems to appeal to universal principles of logic and rational problem-solving or to universal principles of moral reasoning, when the very sources of conflict lie in facts, and in irrational, ingrained prejudices and belief hardened by historical and cultural conditioning and maintained

by economic and nationalistic self-interest. Philosophy may deal with universals; but practical men must deal with particulars in all their messy, recalcitrant, irrational, amoral, explosive and dangerous facticity. The diplomat and the statesman is the man who can do this smoothly, calmly, calculatedly and with perfect good manners. In dealing with international conflicts, the diplomat, or statesman, no doubt must know his history, and his geography, be well-grounded in economics and in law, and know much of the local customs and social mores of the parties involved. But, apart from table talk, is there anything philosophy can offer?

Of course, the statesman must be intelligent and able to reason well, and he must, after a fashion, conform to a code of ethics. Nations who pursue their own interests too brashly, ignoring the sensitivities and national interests of lesser nations must beware of a day of reckoning. Intelligent statesmen and diplomats learn to pursue their nations' interests in the least offensive possible ways. They cultivate good-will, establish mutually beneficial trade arrangements with the controlling groups in other nations, flatter leaders with elaborate ceremonials, sell military supplies and train military officers to establish military connections and dependence, and resolve all conflicts possible by pacts and treaties and international agreements. This is the path of enlightened self-interest. It is indeed the course we would expect intelligent self-interested men to follow, and it requires and develops its own rather special code of ethics, its own axioms and assumptions, and its own sort of rationality. Even between enemies, in the anarchy of sovereign nations, there can exist an understanding and a code of acceptable behavior. Nevertheless, the worldly wisdom of the diplomat and the national legislator,

is always to place the self-interest of his own nation above all other considerations and always to proceed on the assumption that the enemy and the ally alike will act only in their own self-interest. The very suggestion that a slightest portion of national sovereignity should be given up in favor of an international government of law is viewed today as both foolishly unrealistic and smacking of treason. The realistic control of international order is largely in terms of power, economic and military; and the operative rule is that the stronger power can force whatever lesser powers are available to act in matters affecting the two nations so as to support the interests of the stronger.

But the question I wish to consider is not whether self-interested intelligence and reasoning has a role in international affairs, but whether there is a role for universal principles of ethics and logical integrity which go beyond particular national interests, prejudices and pre-conceptions.

Although philosophers have often been confronted with arguments in defense of self-interested decision-making, the philosophical question of how to decide what is right, or what is good or what is bad, is basically a question of finding criteria or reasons which are not tied to special interests or peculiar to this or that individual or group. It is, in short a search for universal principles, which transcend particular interests, prejudices, myths and loyalties.

Consider, for example, the utilitarian theory of ethics; it holds that the way to decide what is best, is to consider the amounts of pleasures or pains the acts under consideration would cause to people, and then select those acts which would bring about the greatest

net amount of pleasure. Regardless of the inadequacies or defects of this particular theory, it shares with other philosophical theories of ethics the characteristic of being universal and non-partisan in application. It does not favor any one person or group of persons over others; it presents a general rule with no favorites. Other Philosophical theories of ethics, again, regardless of their adequacy, deal with the concepts of obligations and duties, virtues, justice, fairness, etc., but always in general terms - they are not one-sided pleas for fairness to this group while disregarding others, or for justice defined in terms of benefits for favored parties.

This stands in sharp contrast to the method of consideration which prevails in the present state of anarchic international relations. As mentioned above, the diplomat or statesman of any given nation, is expected to act always in the interest of his own group only; to do otherwise, to give away any part of his nation's goods or powers on any other ground than that it would serve the interest of the nation, is to invite charges of either incompetence or treason. Consider, for example, the position of the United States with respect to underdeveloped countries. It can well be argued, along utilitarian lines, that the United States could lower its standard of living without impairing its quality of life too much and devote its savings in resources or goods to very significant improvements in the quality of life in under-developed countries. Perhaps citizens of the United States would have to be limited to one car per family, for example, or to smaller amounts of corn-fed beef. No politician or diplomat would dare to propose such a move solely on the grounds that it would be morally right;

unless some compensating gain or advantage could be tied to it for citizens of the United States, it would be ruled out as contrary to the national interest. Yet on certain philosophical principles of ethics, this would be the right thing to do. Nor is this concept of what is right, far out of line with what many citizens of the United States would agree was right. It is a kind of principle of action, however, which can not be ultimately decisive in the present state of international anarchy.

In one sense I seem to be saying that ethical principles or moral principles, which it is the specific business of philosophy to discover or clarify, should play a role in the resolution of international conflict which they do not now play. And indeed, I do wish to suggest something of that sort. But there are a variety of clarifications needed before we can rest content with such a statement.

First, we must distinguish philosophical modes of ethical reasoning from the more special concepts of morality tied to this or that religion or ideology. There is a sense in which philosophy is not opposed to religion; since religious doctrine is often centered on metaphysical theses which philosophy shows cannot be either proven or disproven, philosophy can not close the door on any religious faith. Nevertheless, philosophy does demand that each religious faith be recognized for what it is: a personal committment to views and attitudes which, however valuable to their holders, cannot lay claim to the rational loyalty of all men. Unfortunately, religion is too often viewed otherwise by its adherents. While there is in practically every religion some element of appeal to what is universal in men, there is

also in all the established religions particular and specific creeds. When these are accepted as dogmas, fanaticism and religious bigotry result. The latter have been prime causes of international conflict between 1) India and Pakistan, 2) the Arabs and the Israelis, 3) the protestants and catholics in Northern Ireland, and many other loci of international conflict. No doubt the partisans involved acted on both sides by appeals to some higher "morality" or "moral law", but it was not by appeal to a law of the same universal and non-partisan scope that is sought in philosophical search for ethical principles.

Not only in conflicts between religious groups, but in the ideological struggles between the United States and various communist countries, appeals have been made in the name of "morality", which was really based on religious committments of special sorts. Such injections of so-called moral considerations into foreign policy have been deplored by hard-headed proponents of national self-interest. And indeed, the mischievous effects of such ideological or religious biases have often seemed to do more damage than intelligent employments of national self-interest. Philosophy, I believe, being a critical discipline, helps to sort out what is universal in ethics from what is particular and parochial.

Secondly, a good clear grasp of distinct ethical concepts and modes of reasoning through philosophy, can help people distinguish partisan and one-sided employment of such concepts, from genuine adherence and application. Concepts of fairness and justice, and the welfare of others, are widely appealed to in justification of various international acts. This is no doubt because it is recognized that such appeals strike a responsive note in many people. But whether such

principles are really being used as a basis for decisions, or are merely being appealed to when convenient to gather support, is not always easy to detect. Persons who, through philosophy, come to be truly committed to universal ethical principles and concepts will notice the cases where they are neglected quite apart from their own interests. Others will see them only when it suits their convenience.

It may be argued on the one hand that appeals to universal moral principles are never really decisive - that economic forces, and self-interests of the powerful are always the real determinants of events on the international scene, as elsewhere. Or it may be argued, at the other extreme, that in fact moral considerations already play a stronger role than I have admitted in international affairs. The question as to what "really" causes events is rather metaphysical or ideological in nature, and I am inclined to take a somewhat middle ground.

Consider the recent ratification of the Panama Canal treaty. It could be suggested that something like appeals to moral principles play a part. It seems like a reasonable universal principle for international conduct that every nation, no matter how small or weak, should have control of facilities that lie within its borders. This was one of the arguments advanced in favor of ratification and seems to fall in the category of an ethical one. Some opponents of the treaty claimed that the national interest demanded that the United States retain both operating and military control over the canal. They lost, but it is not clear that the ethical argument won. For one thing, many arguments were put forward, most of them concerned with long-run

self-interest of the United States, and some of which argued that if not ratified the canal could be blown up, there would be riots, all of Latin America would be angered. Some senate votes were no doubt gained by simple horsetrading. Who can say how much influence, if any at all, the ethical arguments had in the actual vote?

Yet, it seems clear to me that in the long run, given propitious conditions such as a free press, ~~often~~ moral or ethical arguments can sometimes take on enormous power. Such, I believe was the case in Vietnam. The moral outrage in almost every nation in the world, finally including the United States, had something important to do with the United State's final withdrawl, I believe. In another arena, the civil rights movement of Martin Luther King, it seems to me, appealed to certain rather universal principles of fairness and got some significant responses from a majority of the people in our country which were not attributable to self-interest.

The United Nations five-week Special Session on Disarmament, which began yesterday, will no doubt yield some laudable and eminently reasonable arguments for disarmament, resting on universal principles of an ethical nature. No doubt, these proposals and arguments will be ignored, more or less, at least for the forseeable future by the great powers to whom they are primarily addressed. With a few minor exceptions, it seems that the role of ethical principles, of the universal sort I have in mind, in fact is rarely decisive in resolving international conflicts at the present time.

The primary obstacle to a larger role for philosophically respectable principles and argument in the resolution of international

conflict is the nationalistic attitudes forced on us by the lack of world government. It is now next to inconceivable that a national leader or diplomat would be able to bring his nation to give up some of its own interest or sovereignty solely for the purpose of doing the right thing to others e.g., where his own nation suffers with no compensating benefit to itself solely to help some other nation benefit. This attitude seems to be a direct result of the anarchy which reigns in the international order. In the United States it is not at all inconceivable that a Representative or Senator from a given state might vote, in some cases, for a bill which would hurt his own constituency but would be clearly for the good of some other part of the country. That is because his constituents conceive of themselves not only as citizens of his state, but as citizens of the same country. Indeed they are sometimes willing to die for the latter. If all countries were united under a genuine world government, might not our representatives to that government find support for giving up some of our great affluence for the benefit of other members of our world? For then we would be citizens, with these others, of the same world. Thus, in large degree, the prospect for more rational use of what philosophers can offer in the way of clarifying universal ethical principles and distinguishing such principles from special interests, depends I think, on creating a governmental structure within which national interests and loyalties are subordinated to world interests and larger loyalties. But it also depends upon extending the reach of philosophy so that people are taught to distinguish what is universal from the parochial, the narrow, and the particular. And this is intimately connected with the liberation that comes through liberal education, including philosophy.