Double Think and Double Effect

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In the recent collection of essays entitled 'Nuclear Weapons and Christian Conscience', Elizabeth Anscombe asks how it is that Catholics have been able to accommodate themselves with so little strain of conscience to modern war;[1] and the answer, in her own telling phrase, is 'double think about double effect'. We all know what she means; but perhaps it is not always easy to see just where double effect thinking becomes 'double think'.

The principle of double effect is in itself by no means so mysterious and subtle a doctrine as it is sometimes thought. It is no more in fact than a rational and systematic explanation of what goes on in our minds when we wonder whether or not to perform a certain action which we see will have both good and bad effects. Thus a man who sells sporting shotguns in a district where there is a danger of violence many wonder whether to carry on with his trade. If he does, he will be carrying on his normal and legitimate occupation, and supporting his family; but at the same time, he will be adding to the danger of human injury. How is he to make his decision? Catholic tradition would suggest four principles (though found with many variations) to help him make his choice. An act with two effects, one good and the other bad, is lawful, according to this tradition, on four conditions. First, the action, viewed in itself, must be good or at least indifferent; secondly, the agent must not intend the evil effect, but only the good; thirdly, the good effect must be produced as immediately as – that is not by means of – the bad; and, fourthly, there must be a sufficiently weighty reason for permitting the evil effect. Now if we apply the principles to the case of the man selling shotguns, they begin to look like ordinary common sense. The act of selling shotguns is in itself lawful, so the first difficulty is solved; clearly the man does not intend to increase the violence in the district (and presumably he will show this by taking care who he sells the guns to); the good effect – carrying on his normal business and earning his livelihood – is not the result of the increase in violence (if any). So he is in the clear on the first three counts, and all that remains is to weigh the

[1]*Nuclear Weapons and Christian Conscience*, ed. Walter Stein (Merlin Press, 1961), p. 57.

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evil against the good (not quite so easy as it sounds) and make his decision.

Although this sounds laborious, it is as I say not at all remote from common-sense; nor is the problem a rare one, as may be suggested by our concocted examples. All our actions have complicated results. A moral act is like throwing a stone into a pool – the ripples spread out indefinitely, the cross-currents become more and more complex, until even the most acute mind would be baffled by the attempt to plot them. All our actions in fact have multiple effects; how then do we exercise our moral responsibility in such a confusing situation? Most of the time there is no problem at all; we live in what we have defined by a kind of moral intuition as our centre of responsibility, and we discount without having to think about it what is outside the limit. Only on occasions does the problem of multiple results thrust itself into our consciousness, when we become aware of some outstanding contradiction, some particularly choppy cross-current in the obvious results of one of our actions. In such a case, we define the limits of our responsibility, perhaps discounting responsibility in such ordinary phrases as 'I must do what is right, and I can't help it if *x* is offended', or, 'that (referring to an accidental bad result of something we intend to do) is not worth worrying about', or 'it's worth the risk'. Now all these can easily be seen to be common-sense applications of double effect principles – which is not surprising, since as we shall see double effect principles are themselves simply a rationalisation of common-sense decisions.

There is however some disagreement among moralists when it comes to a problem like, say, the bombing of cities. In July, 1943, for instance, Hamburg was raided, and the whole of the central area of the city was transformed into one huge furnace – rather like the result of a small-scale nuclear attack.[2] Phosphorous bombs were used, incendiary weapons which sprayed out a molten phosphorous material that stuck to anything it hit, and burst spontaneously into flames that nothing could extinguish. Some of the material sprayed people, with unfortunate results. Now obviously all this is a very bad effect. But is it clearly wrong, and how does double effect thinking help us to decide? It could be argued that there is an important good effect too – the undermining of the German war effort, and the saving of the countless casualties who would have fallen if the war had been prolonged. It

[2]For a full account of the Hamburg raid see *The Night Hamburg Died*, by Martin Caidin (Ballantine Books, New York, 1960).

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would probably be claimed that the airmen and the officers who planned the raid intended the good and not the evil effects; and that the good was produced by the destruction of the material fabric of the city, independently of the death of the 70,000 civilians who 'accidentally' happened to be there. The case, as I say, is arguable. One group of moralists would say that the scales tipped one way, and another group would say that they tipped the other way. A third group, however, would perhaps feel that these was something rather silly about the whole discussion; this would be the group who had begun to smell the rat of double-think, though they perhaps do not know how to catch it.

Historically speaking, the double effect principles were elaborated by the Salamanca theologians of the sixteenth century.[3] John of St Thomas gave them their final shape,[4] gathering together threads from the work of his predecessors Medina, Vasquez and Sanchez. The principles as John of St Thomas stated them were much the same as those we outlined above. If an act with a bad and a good effect is to be permitted, the bad must be 'praeter intentionem', it must follow 'per accidens' from the act in question, and there must be proportionality between the good and the evil. It is assumed that the act must not be evil in itself.

What is perhaps of much greater interest than the detail of the Spanish theologians' speculations is the cases on which they were working. Medina, for instance, discusses the case of a classical student who has to study the salacious Latin poet Martial, but who finds that he is aroused to impurity in the process; he also considers whether a girl should walk through the streets knowing that she will arouse the sexual passions of the local youth, and whether a butcher should sell meat to a Jew knowing that it will be used for heretical practices. Needless to say, in all these cases the answer is that the act is permitted – the student may study, the girl may walk, the butcher may sell meat to the Jew. Vasquez took up the same question of accidental impurity, and also brought in the problem of indirect abortion (though he had some difficulty here). John of St Thomas repeated the problem of the girl walking through the street, the student with his Martial, and the butcher and the Jew, which had evidently by this time become stock examples; but at the end of his list of cases he adds, unobtrusively, the case of the man who kills in self-defence. Now this last example comes from a very different stock.

[3]For the history of the double effect principle I am much indebted to the article by G. Ghoos in *Ephemerides Thelogicae Lovanienses*, Vol. 27 (1951), pp. 30-52.
[4]See *De Bonitate et Malitia Actuum Humanorum*, by John of St Thomas.

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The question of killing in self-defence had originally been discussed by St Augustine in '*De Libero Arbitrio*'.[5] His view of the matter was quite clear: killing in self-defence was never permissible for the Christian, since it could only be the result of an inordinate and therefore sinful attachment to one's own transitory life. Perhaps St Augustine was unrealistic in thus setting up a sacrificial standard of conduct as obligatory; in any case, there is no doubt that his teaching was generally neglected in favour of the more 'ordinary' morality enshrined in most of our legal codes, that killing in self-defence is justifiable where it is the only way out. St Thomas Aquinas was faced with apparently contradictory traditions, he had to reconcile the teaching of St Augustine with what had become the ordinary morality of Christendom.

St Thomas tackles the problem in his usual manner[6] by quoting first the doctrine of St Augustine, and then the apparently contradictory teaching embodied, for example, in the Decretal. He goes on to point out that nothing hinders an act from having two effects, one of which is intended, while the other is beside the intention; and that moral acts take their species from what is intended – not from what is beside the intention. It is natural for everything to keep itself in being, and it is lawful to repel force by force; if this results in the death of an attacker, the death will be accidental. It is never lawful to *intend* to kill, except when a man acts by public authority.

Now this all seems clear enough in the abstract, but the problem is, what is it about? We can imagine two possible situations. In the first, I am attacked in the street, and in the course of the ensuing struggle, I push my assailant so that he falls; but in falling, he knocks his head against the kerb of the pavement and is instantly killed. This is an 'accident' in the ordinary meaning of the word; and again, in the ordinary meaning of the word 'intend', I did not intend to kill him. Then there is the second case. I am attacked by a murderous assassin, and I decide that the only effective way to defend myself is to kill him before he kills me; and in the ensuing struggle, I succeed in killing him. This is *not* an accident, in the ordinary sense of the word; and again, in the ordinary sense of the word, I *do* intend to kill him.

If it is the first kind of case that St Thomas has in mind, that of a genuinely accidental killing, it is difficult to see what all the fuss is about – accidents in the ordinary sense of the word don't seem to raise any serious moral problem, and in any case it would be very odd to discuss

[5]See my article *St Augustine and the Just War*, in BLACKFRIARS, Nov. 1962.
[6]*Summa*, 2a-2ae, 64, 7.

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the permissibility of different kinds of accident. Whatever St Thomas did in fact mean (and I have no wish to be dogmatic about this), what he has been *taken to mean* is quite clear; and that is that you can in case of necessity kill in self-defence, provided that *in a special theological sense* you do not intend to do so. Ask anyone with an ordinary Thomistic training whether you can kill in self-defence, and the answer will be a more or less straightforward 'yes'; and you can be quite sure that the case he has in mind is *not* that of purely accidental killing, because who would bother to ask a question about that in the first place? Perhaps if you probed a little deeper, and asked pointedly whether you could *intentionally* kill in self-defence, most priests would have uneasy recollections of some special technique that has to be applied to this word; but you can be fairly sure that whatever he said, your original impression of what you could actually *do* would not be changed. St Thomas's teaching may have been a skilful compromise, but its effect seems to have been to bury the tradition of St Augustine.

It may be that we can trace some of our double think difficulty to this rift which began to open in the thirteenth century between the ordinary and the technical-theological meaning of 'intention'. It is already a kind of double think if I can say that I intend to do something in the ordinary sense of the word, but I do *not* intend to do it in a special sense which exonerates me from responsibility. It was not St Thomas, however, as we have seen, who worked out the complexities of the double effect theory, but the Spanish neo-scholastics of the sixteenth century; and they were dealing in the first place with cases of quite a different nature from that of killing in self-defence. They were concerned mainly with removing scruples from the consciences of people who saw that their ordinary activities could have bad results – *though they did not in any way intend* those bad results. The girl walking through the streets evidently did not intend by so doing to arouse the local youth (or if she did she is not the kind of girl we took her for!); the butcher did not intend in any sense to participate in un-Christian religious practices; the student did not intend to use his Martial as a means of impurity. It was however from such cases as these that the principles of double effect were originally elaborated; and when the case of killing in self-defence was added to these in the sixteenth century, the danger of double think was greatly increased. For since in the other cases there was clearly no harmful intention even in the ordinary sense of the word, we may begin to allow ourselves to believe that killing in self-defence is also free of any harmful intention in the ordinary sense

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of the word – and this would be a very radical double-think if at the same time we knew in another part of our minds that we were talking precisely about a killing which *was* intentional in the ordinary sense of the word! At this stage of double think a much more sinister danger arises; for this confusion of the ordinary meaning of words can so obscure the original human action that we no longer really know *what* we are doing, with the result that our actions become *amoral*, rather than moral or immoral. This is perhaps particularly true in the sphere of public actions, where other factors also tend to diminish responsibility. Amoral actions, however, are unlikely to remain morally neutral; a more sinister power whom we may have left out of our calculations is ready to take over the wheel which we have left deserted.

We run on to the rocks of double think all the more easily because the pattern of ideas which has led us astray is based on easily acceptable moral judgments; and this raises the whole problem of the relationship between our moral systems and the real moral judgments on which they are based. The Spanish theologians worked, as we have seen, mainly from cases in which they were concerned to dissipate unreasonable scruples – to help people to define the limits of their responsibility, reassure the scrupulous maiden that she was not committing a sin against purity when she went on her walk, nor the student when he set about his studies. No-one would be likely to quarrel with the decisions in these cases, and the way the decisions were explained in terms of double effect seems sensible enough. Killing in self-defence we also traditionally accept, and are therefore open to any explanation which will dispel lurking doubts – and there is sufficient truth in saying that I do not really *intend* to kill to make this explanation gain access to our consciousness; after all, I do not *want* to kill the man who attacks me, I would much rather not – but he gives me no alternative. Thus the sugar-coating of truth enables us to swallow the little pill of falsity; and the explanation of this case too can seem to us a reasonable enough systematisation of ordinary moral thinking.

So long as the systematisation of moral judgments remains closely in touch with real situations, as in the cases we have been discussing, little harm is done. There comes a point, however, a take-off point, when the system begins to take over, and the real situations drop away into the distance. This is of course true of all systems but it is more likely to occur when the system begins to develop a special technical language – such as the specialised use of 'intention'. When a word like this is pulled up from its roots in ordinary usage, the system can become more

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self-enclosed, more remote from reality, more a precise intellectual exercise – and of course for that very reason in a way more intellectually satisfying, for as long as we remain in a self-enclosed system where words have a precise meaning within the terms of the system, we can achieve a much greater clarity than the complexity of the real will normally allow us. Consequently, it is often a painful and difficult process to return to reality, with all the loss of clarity and apparent loss of intellectual control which this return involves.

It is almost as if a pure mathematician were forced to descend from the realm of higher mathematics to work out his monthly family budget; or we may think even more appropriately of the 'pure grammarian' of the old prescriptive school, who is obliged to descend from his neat logical system to the intractable complexity of what people actually say and write. The comparison of the grammarian with the moralist is interesting; for it is now generally accepted that the grammarian must begin with usage – he can do no other than observe the language as it is, and try to give a systematic account of the patterns which he actually sees in it, organic patterns which are part of the extraordinarily subtle and complex achievement of human minds working collectively which we call linguistic evolution. The grammarian's system may be useful and illuminating, but it would be extraordinary if he returned with it to falsify the usage on which it was based! Some of our old-fashioned grammar-books, which rule out of order ordinary and useful ways of speaking, illustrate this oddity. Perhaps moralists also should beware of the extent to which they too are rationalising usage, systematising ordinary moral intuitions – and therefore beware of returning with their systems from a lofty height to falsify the intuitions on which the systems are based, beware, for example, lest they take off from the case of the scrupulous Spanish maiden, and find themselves dropping phosphorous bombs into the blazing inferno of Hamburg (a remarkable change of scene!), or contemplating the use of nuclear weapons, of which Hamburg was a mild premonition.

One curious result of systematic abstraction in morals is that it can produce a complete inability to make real decisions. The system lives on concocted hypothetical cases; the systematiser will always tell you 'if this, then that', but he will find it increasing difficult to say 'this' or 'that', or to act in a morally creative way in any given situation. Thus, the unsystematic early Christians had little difficulty in coming to a practical decision not to throw a grain of incense on to a flame before a statue of the Roman Emperor; but their systematic successors find it

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very difficult indeed to decide not to throw hydrogen bombs on to cities of human beings.

It is an illusion to imagine that our present difficulties can be solved merely by improving the system. The Revd Walter MacDonald, in an important essay on the double effect[7], subjected all the traditional principles to a corrosive criticism, and came to the conclusion that none of them really stood up to the test of logical analysis or of application to reality: even the principle that the good must not come through the evil seems hard to reconcile with things like the killing of cattle (a bad thing) to eat (a good thing). In the place of the four traditional conditions for permitting an act with a double effect, MacDonald holds that we should substitute two more simple rules: that the act 'does not subordinate a being which by nature is not to to be subordinated, and the good effect produced is sufficient to compensate for the bad'.[8] We may agree that these principles are near to the heart of the matter; but the problem remains of judging in any particular case which beings should be subordinated to others, and how the good effects weigh against the bad – and as with the previous formulations of the rules, it has to be acknowledged that our actions really depend on direct evaluations of this kind; the system merely helps to focus the problem. How is this evaluation to be made? Some theologians would imagine a graded series of essences and values which would enable us to measure and compute what should be done in any particular case. The question is, are we even thinking in the right direction if we imagine such a scale? Do we imagine that moral problems can ultimately be solved by feeding facts into a computing machine, which would give us a yes/no answer in each case? How many units of value would we give to the innocent families roasted in their shelters in saturation raids (or nuclear attack) – how many to the 'preservation of the values of the West'? MacDonald in any case has a more realistic view. He acknowledges that, in the case of subordination, 'the conclusions of Catholic ethics are not deduced by our writers on morals from any general principle or rule of conduct, but are drawn from intuitions which vary with the different essences and with their circumstances'; and, in the case of the balancing of good against bad, that 'the circumstances must be balanced in individual cases, and allowances made'.

It is not, however, just the complexity of situations which makes

[7] *The Principles of Moral Science*, by the Revd Walter MacDonald (Dublin, 1910), pp. 187-209.
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 200.

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computer-morality seem rather absurd. A significant moral decision is often a creative act – it is a witness to a value, a creative act which brings to light what was hidden, which makes incarnate in the world (and in the witness himself) what was only potential. To this extent it can never appear simply as the result of a calculation. A creative moral act must indeed in one aspect appear as a movement towards an existing value; but it is also a movement forward into the indefinable. It is a marriage and a commitment to a value, and like any good marriage it must involve more than calculation. It is this creative more which makes much double effect thinking seem so absurdly irrelevant when circumstances demand a significant moral commitment.

I was reading recently the biography of a Quaker who served in the Friends' Ambulance Unit in the 1914-18 war. At a certain point he felt morally obliged to leave it. I quote here the reasons for this decision in his own words because this seems to be an authentic example of creative moral decision. 'On the outbreak of war . . . I offered myself for voluntary service on the battlefield, with a little ambulance unit organised by a few young Quakers . . . For nineteen months I was spared to continue this work at the front. Meanwhile, however, the medical service had become completely organised; voluntary units were either dispensed with, or practically absorbed into the regular armies. The wounded no longer lacked help, and the RAMC was often closed to applicants . . . I was baffled more and more by the consciousness that, under military control, the primary object was the re-fitting of men to take their place in the trenches. Conscription followed, and it seemed to me that, for one called to serve in the cause of peace, the position was becoming impossible. At home, men who stood for the same ideals as myself, were being reviled as cowards and shirkers, and forced into the army against their principles. When some of them were sent to France and became liable to the death penalty, I hesitated no longer. It seemed to me more honest and manly to take up my stand with them, make public profession of my faith, and accept the consequences. I could have obtained exemption by undertaking some 'alternative service' recognised as important in the organisation of the war. But I am enlisted in the highest service I know, the formation of a world-fellowship of men prepared to die rather than take part in war; and the foundations of such a fellowship . . . cannot rest upon compromise.'[9]

There is clearly an element of careful calculation of circumstances here, or perhaps rather a reading of events; but whereas calculation and

[9]*Indomitable Friend*, the biography of C. C. Catchpool, by W. R. Hughes, p. 32.

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abstraction in themselves would only have led to perpetual indecision, in this case they led to a creative moral act which rings true because it is the act of a man with an unclouded conscience, committed to seek the will of God even in the complexity of actual warfare, a man who is already a martyr in the sense that he is aware of the need to give meaning to his life, and who is aware also of the need for moral leadership, the need to act as a leaven in the world, and not just to accept its standards. The remainder of his life, utterly dedicated as it was to the cause of international peace, bears witness to the authenticity of his moral decision. To such a man double effect thinking might be helpful, but double think would be impossible. It is perhaps to such men that we should turn for inspiration if we are puzzled by the relationship between the two.

From Graded to Comprehensive Schools

P. J. O'CONNELL

Perhaps no other state can exhibit the variety in organization represented by English educational institutions at the secondary school stage. Within the boundaries of a single local authority may often be discovered public and private schools, direct grant grammar schools financed by the Ministry of Education, and their municipal counterparts governed by local councils, in whose care would also be found secondary modern and technical schools. The religious bodies, particularly the Church of England in the countryside and the Catholic Church in the industrial areas, have their own parallel foundations.

Nevertheless, irrespective of the constitution of the Governing Board or the section of the population served, the majority of them will probably echo in their studies and administration the prevailing educational philosophy. According to this theory there exists in the nation

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