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Divided Deterrence: The Philosophical Community's Response to Nuclear Warfare in 1980s

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Abstract:

This paper investigates the varied reaction of the Western analytic philosophical community to the ethical quandaries created by nuclear deterrence throughout the Cold War era, notably in the 1980s. It covers the important disputes during the 1984 Aspen Institute Conference, with an emphasis on philosophical differences between Jan Narveson and Jeff McMahan. The study also addresses Leslie Stevenson's nuanced stance, which was delivered outside the meeting. By evaluating these philosophical conversations, the article emphasizes the larger ethical issues of nuclear weapons and the importance of serious moral deliberation in dealing with global dangers. A historical assessment of these disputes illustrates the constant difficulties in reaching an agreement on the ethical use of nuclear deterrence, acting as a reminder of the continued need for philosophical direction in contemporary global issues.

Keywords: Nuclear deterrence, Analytic philosophy, Cold War ethics, Moral philosophy, Aspen Institute Conference.

1. Introduction

In August 1945, the drop of two nuclear bombs foreverly altered the global landscape. Since then, the usage of nuclear weapons has penetrated all discussions, highlighting the destructive nature of modern warfare. The shadow of the atomic weapons brought the psychological and ethical trauma of mass destruction to the forefront, revealing the consequences of nuclear weapons. Since 1950, the issue has been silenced for three decades. However, during the Cold War era, the advancement of the Soviet Union in nuclear weapon design in the 1980s reignited an intense debate among strategists and philosophers about the role of nuclear weapons as a deterrence to protect the country. What did the Western analytic philosophers conclude on this ethical dilemma? The answer might be surprising against the expectation that the English-speaking society reached agreement unanimously that nuclear deterrence should be deployed: On the contrary, the analytic philosophers were divided on the buildup of nuclear weapons for deterrence.

1.1 Background

From the 1940s until the 1970s, the morality of nuclear weapons was a contentious topic. A stress on survival above ethical reflection characterized the years after the Second World War and the early stages of the Cold War. Governments and military institutions were the main players in the nuclear weapons race at that time. When it came to policies, philosophers frequently had little impact since security and strategy took precedence. It wasn't until the 1980s, when public awareness expanded and movements like the anti-nuclear weapons campaign emerged, that some academic members at Harvard Kennedy School began to evaluate the nuclear danger and assess policy options. Harvard Nuclear Study Group published the book *Living with Nuclear Weapons* in 1983, sparking a debate about the ethics of nuclear weapons. [1]

1.2 Nuclear Scenario & Philosophical Community

To understand my thesis, readers must be familiar with both the nuclear scenario in the 1980s and the position of the philosophical community at the time. To begin with the nuclear situation: in the 1980s, the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union heated up. During the 1970s and 1980s, the Soviet Union made substantial advances in nuclear weapons technology, developing Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles, strategic bombers and submarine-launched missiles. Such escalation triggered an upgrading of the United States' nuclear arsenal as well as enhanced military development, which occurred during Reagan's first year in office. [2] Beyond that, Reagan proposed START (Strategic Arms Reduction Talks) for major warhead reductions, resulting in massive antinuclear rallies while NATO deploys improved missiles in Europe. He

gave a speech in which he referred to the Soviet Union as an "evil empire," also causing widespread fear. It seemed that a nuclear war was imminent. [3]

The apprehensive societal milieu worked as the spur for the advancement of analytic philosophy in the West, which consequently became the dominant philosophical school of the period. Continental philosophy, which was at the time trying to analyze capitalism with the ideas of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, was not well embraced in the Western hemisphere during this period compared to before, since it was popular amongst Communists and was committed to a deep critique of Western capitalism. The English-speaking philosophical community was deeply rooted in analytic philosophy, characterized by rigorous logical analysis and a stress on language, wrestled with the ethical quandaries posed by nuclear weapons. In the post-1945 English-speaking moral philosophy community, philosophers focused on ordinary-language analysis, seeking to understand the ways that language could or could not reflect physical reality. [4] Following that, the analytic philosophy group began to investigate philosophical issues in linguistic terms, with two major ethical schools dominating their discussion: utilitarianism and deontology. The former decides right and wrong based on outcomes, whereas the latter defines good and bad activities based on a system of rules. Philosophers were committed to logical, scientific responses to moral concerns, but they used two different registers to accomplish it.

1.3 Past Investigation

Topics around the development of analytic philosophy in the Atlantic world and the widespread nuclear fear have been widely studied by multiple scholars in the past. In Scott Soames's *Analytic Philosophy in America*, he explores the timeline of the growth in both quantity and quality of philosophical works produced in the field of analytic philosophy, rising since the 1950s and reaching the dominance in the 1970s and 1980s. [5] But how the nuclear crisis during the Cold War era affected philosophical work was not mentioned in this study. In Thomson's "Nuclear War and Nuclear Fear in the 1970s and 1980s," he discussed the fueled confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, creating a risky environment in which nuclear war was on the verge of breaking out. [6] What should be kept in readers' mind is: Though Thomson mentioned the possibility of nuclear war, he did not look into how the strategists or philosophers attempted to address the problem and create social guidelines.

1.4 Research Value

While researchers have investigated the evolution of analytic philosophy following the Second World War, as well as popular anxieties of nuclear armageddon, they have not combined these two key subjects. Readers consequently lack an understanding of how the Cold War intellectual community responded to the most serious threat to global peace. This is what I shall investigate in my article. In response to the research gap, I will mainly focus my study on the 1984 Aspen Institute conference, which was the first large philosophical conference to address nuclear war questions, acting as a miniature of the whole English-speaking philosophical society during the 1980s. I will first concentrate on two publications in particular to investigate how the analytic philosophers vary on how to deal with the United States' nuclear weapons. In the first primary source, Jan Narveson, a professor of philosophy emeritus at the University of Waterloo, argues that nuclear deterrence should be used to maintain peace. In contrast, my second primary source, White's Professor of Moral Philosophy at Oxford University, Jeff McMahan, rebuts by underlining the moral wrongness of nuclear deterrence. After that, I shall introduce an argument by Leslie Stevenson, professor at University of St. Andrews, who leans towards considering using deterrence as ethically problematic but acknowledges the practical complexities that make it difficult to categorically condemn in the current geopolitical context, serving as an epitome of the differences in viewpoints among the analytic philosophers in 1980s, which, to a broader extent, failed to act as a reliable moral guidance.

2. Source Analysis

2.1 Jan Narveson: Support Nuclear Deterrence

The first source I will explore is Jan Narveson's "Getting on the Road to Peace: A Modest Proposal." In this article, the author summarizes the reason for a rising nuclear competition and proposes setting a confined to legitimately defensive ends to ensure national security. [7] We can get to understand that there was some misunderstanding between the U.S. and the USSR. [7] Originated from the issues such as the USSR's setting up of "buffer states" and America's first deployment of nuclear bombs, mistrust was built and could not be erased in a short time. Consequently, four nuclear strategies were listed as follows: 1. Gaining extreme nuclear superiority to destroy the opponent while retaining enough for further strategic capability. 2. Reaching a parity with the opponent's nuclear power. 3. Producing limited nuclear weapons to do intolerable harm to the opponent but no more. 4. Destroy all nuclear weapons, leaving only conventional capabilities. [7] The author refutes 1 for being with no upper limit,

overdrafting U.S. capability, as well as 4 for being too vulnerable. Therefore, in an utilitarian view one should choose a method between 2 and 3, making the offensively usable element of it appear far less fearsome than that of its opponents. [7] This allows a country to create a clear defensive stance while also morally limiting its opponents by making them appear aggressive, thus minimizing the risk of war.

The paper expresses a typical perspective at the Aspen conference, representing utilitarianism. It supports the notion that a nuclear deterrent strategy achieves the best overall results. Furthermore, he agrees that the American concept of nuclear deterrence is predicated on the assumption that morality is forfeited if one's country is attacked under a Hobbesian-style international order. [8]

2.2 Jeff McMahan: Criticize Nuclear Deterrence

However, multiple attendees at the meeting objected to deterrence. This leads to Jeff McMahan's "Deterrence and Deontology," in which he argues that the conditional purpose to deploy nuclear weapons is ethically problematic, and instead of adopting a deontological technique to demonstrate its inadequacies, he seeks to analyze the moral concerns associated with nuclear deterrence at their underlying causes. Deontologists argue that nuclear deterrence is immoral because it indicates a conditional intent to use nuclear weapons in unethical ways. Nuclear deterrence is regarded as immoral since it requires this goal, which is seen as illegal in and of itself. [9] However, according to the author, using deontology to refute nuclear deterrence is a lack of solidarity in these three ways: Firstly, the deontologists suggest the Criterion of Proportionality, suggesting that to justify an act, the expected benefits must outweigh any potential negative repercussions. However, it is impossible to quantify the good and bad consequences and measure them with proportionality. For example, killing the lives of *x* people cannot be compared with the freedom of *y* people. [9] Secondly, deontology refers to the Criterion of Discrimination states that the unintended death of any non-combatant is unethical, which is unavoidable in a nuclear conflict. It is difficult to determine if an action is meant or not, rendering such a criteria incorrect. Third, it is claimed that nuclear deterrence corrupts national leaders and generals by presenting them as sinners plotting the annihilation of humanity. However, this thought automatically places the offenders as victims, that they are minor in comparison to the entire population that has suffered from nuclear weapons, leaving aside the "moral luck" (In this case, the offender intends to carry out a nuclear war but external circumstances prevent him from doing so or causing massive harm).

Thus, the author put forward his own idea to refuse nuclear deterrence: "It is wrong, other things being equal, to risk doing that which it would be wrong to do and wrong to support a policy which carries a risk of wrongdoing-in particular a policy which makes it possible for wrong to be done in one's name or with one's authorization." [9] If invoking nuclear deterrence just implies bluffing on something that will never happen, it is considered a kind of deception and hence morally inappropriate. On the other hand, if nuclear deterrence is regarded as a serious possibility, then it is immoral to aim, even conditionally, to do what is forbidden to do because saying that nuclear weapons will be deployed increases the chance of actually carrying it out. Furthermore, to the opponent, employing nuclear weapons is only an option and has no bearing on a real nuclear conflict. There must be reason to believe that the possibility is the basis of the policy, which does not exist. The author challenges utilitarianism in nuclear deterrence theory and rejects the use of deontology as a solution. He proposed a unique way to highlight the immorality of using nuclear deterrence.

2.3 Conclusion: Division

It should be evident from the debate at the 1985 Aspen Conference that philosophers are divided on whether to use nuclear deterrence. The two articles have supporters on both sides, but neither can persuade the other. However, it should be noted that, unlike strategists, who also joined the discussion at the Aspen Conference, philosophers' divergent judgments are not primarily motivated by variations in their objective assessments of which systems would work best for differentiation. Rather, what most divides philosophers on the question of which nuclear policy to pursue are fundamental assumptions of moral philosophy. [8]

2.4 Societal Philosophical Conflict

2.4.1 Leslie Stevenson: Questioning the Ethics

Let us shift our attention out from the philosophical disputes at this microcosmic meeting and toward the philosophical conflicts in society as a whole, that the philosophers were still at divergence. We can do this by leaving the Aspen conference behind to see how other philosophers, in other journals, were dealing with the issue. The year after the important symposium in *Ethics*, another high-profile journal, called *Philosophy*, published an article on ethics of nuclear deterrence. That article shows that the tensions and uncertainties of the Aspen conference affected the philosophical profession as a whole, and not just those philosophers who happened to be at the conference. The author, Leslie Stevenson, is a famous philosopher at University of St. Andrews, an American philos-

opher best known for his pioneering work in the field of metaethics. [10]

In his article "Is Nuclear Deterrence Ethical?", Leslie Stevenson raises the unresolved moral trauma, balancing between McMahan's argument, which rejects nuclear arms altogether, and Narveson's viewpoint, which insists on their necessity for national defense. In his perspective, the main two different sides in the discussion of nuclear deterrence can be categorized into absolutism and consequentialism. The case of absolutism, according to Stevenson, can be put into the form of the argument including that "It is wrong to have any intention (even a conditional intention) to do something wrong," which can be linked to McMahan's argument that it's wrong to intend, even conditionally, to do what is wrong to do. [11] However, Stevenson contends that such a premise separates the immorality of conditional intentions to do wrong from the principle that it is immoral to threaten to do wrong; additionally, an absolutist may permit the issuing of an insincere threat without intending to carry it out, as in the case of bluffing in a hostage situation, if doing so advances a greater good like saving lives. This fits in nicely with McMahan's argument, potentially pointing out the flaws of an absolutist's point of view.

Stevenson provided the consequentialist approach after the absolutist one, which is to utilize nuclear deterrence for national security in dire circumstances. He argues that this provides a norm that allows one nation to behave harshly in extreme circumstances, establishing a threshold that allows for a high intrinsic value on the non-performance of the forbidden sort of action, in this case, nuclear war. It is commonly assumed that the possession of nuclear weapons by at least one potentially hostile country generates a constant state of extraordinary national emergency, justifying the massive countermeasures of which we are all well aware. Stevenson shares Narveson's concern that countries have fallen into a vicious cycle of armament competition due to distrust.

In contrasting the two viewpoints, Stevenson notes that each permits some calculations in support of nuclear deterrence and the requirement of national sovereignty to identify the moral conundrum. But rather than taking a position, he decides to "base on balance," as he puts it in his own words. [11] It is easy to see that although philosophers like Stevenson had weighed the pros and disadvantages of each position, they were unable to provide a definitive response or to advise society as a whole on whether or not to use nuclear deterrence as a major collective strategy.

2.5 Conclusion

The philosophical community of the 1980s was deeply divided on the issue of nuclear deterrence. The three key texts chosen from the Aspen Institute Conference and subsequent publications properly demonstrate how analytic philosophers struggled with the ethical implications of nuclear deterrence in the 1980s, unable to achieve a conclusive consensus. The greater relevance of this research stems from its exposure of the difficulties and ethical quandaries posed by nuclear weapons. This historical occurrence serves as a reminder of the significance of rigorous ethical deliberation and the need for coherent philosophical direction in modern global challenges such as climate change and developing technology, both of which have high stakes. By understanding the past, we are better equipped to navigate the moral complexities of the present and future.

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