

A Statement of Conscientious Objection

In this essay I shall attempt to acquaint you with my beliefs on God, the development of those beliefs through my religious training and my scientific pursuits, and the ethical positions on warfare which are concomitant with those beliefs. I have intended to cover all of the material requested in the questions of series II of form 150 for conscientious objection to war and hope that this will have given you background sufficient to judge the depth and sincerity of my beliefs.

My mother and father are both of the Jewish faith. My mother is the daughter of a rabbi, and my father was brought up in the Orthodox Jewish tradition. I attended Sunday School and Sabbath services regularly at Temple Beth El in Berkeley from the age of seven until I was confirmed at the age of sixteen, and I am still profoundly interested and engaged in activities which I believe embody the Jewish ethical values which I acquired as a young person.

Reform Judaism is an historically recent off-shoot of Orthodox Judaism, and its endeavor is to extract the essential ethical values from the more rigid, traditional form, while turning away from most of the ritual and dogma. Hence, the concept of God in Reform Judaism is not one concerned so much with his might and other physical attributes as it is concerned with the ways God would have a man behave toward his fellow

men, if that man chooses to serve God. The chief concern is that a man walk in the way of the Lord, and it is through the ethical teachings of our religion that we learn how to follow the way of the Lord and, hence, to know the Lord.

To convey the spirit of the teachings of Reform Judaism, I would like to offer a few passages from our Sabbath prayer book.

"Grant us peace, Thy most precious gift,
O Thou eternal source of peace, and enable
Israel to be its messenger unto the peoples
of the earth. Bless our country that it may
ever be a stronghold of peace, and its adv-
ocate in the council of nations."

"It hath been told thee, O man, what is good,
and what the Lord doth require of thee; Only
to do justly and to love mercy, and to walk
humbly with Thy God."

"O Lord, how can we know Thee? Where can
we find Thee? ... When justice burns like
a flaming fire within us, when to the last
full measure of selfless devotion, we proclaim
our belief in the ultimate triumph of truth
and righteousness, do we not bow down before
the vision of Thy goodness? Thou livest within
our hearts, as Thou dost pervade the world,
and we through righteousness behold Thy presence."

The abiding emphasis of all the ethical teachings is on love of one's fellow man, and it is this spirit of ethical conscientiousness which forms the basis for my religious beliefs.

My present thoughts on the nature of God derive most clearly from my religious training and also, though perhaps surprisingly, from my studies of science. The sources of my religious training have been too numerous to mention individually, but they would

at least include my Sunday school teachers, my parents, and rabbis.

When I was in junior high school at about the time of my bar-mitzvah or acceptance as a man into the Jewish faith, I was very concerned with reconciling my views on God with what I knew by virtue of my experiences actually existed on earth. Was God a power capable of intervening in our lives? If so, I wasn't at that time capable of discerning his presence, at least in the form for which I was looking.

My early skepticism met its master in the wonderful teacher who taught our post-confirmation class, Mr. Ben Rust, who was most instrumental in the formation of my present concept of God. Mr. Rust, through his impressive knowledge of biblical history, showed our class that, while the Bible cannot all be taken literally, the nature of God is very clearly and unambiguously elucidated. As stated, it is an article of faith, which one can accept or reject, but that if one is to accept it, then it must be applied consistently - not to be in some cases countermanded by human direction, and, hence, superior to duties arising from any human relation. It is the axiom which states that you must act justly and love your fellow man as yourself, and that to do these things is to manifest God's will. This is the God in which I firmly believe and according to whose precepts I try to live.

I mentioned that my concept of God also derived from my studies of science. Since before the second grade I have had an interest in things scientific. I can remember a tin can robot

which I made at that time, which, though it was unsuccessful at anything but blowing fuses, must have convinced me that human beings were more complex than home-made robots. I went through long periods of interest in chemistry, electrical science, and mathematics. Biology, because it seemed to contain a lot of detail and no structure, did not appeal to me until college. I was interested in explanation and not classification. Sciences which lead to the kind of understanding that might enable their students to reconstruct the objects of study appealed to me.

Needless to say, religious beliefs which called upon one to accept them on faith were not compatible with my scientific disposition. A scientist places faith in his axioms if they lead to useful results and supply consistent explanations, but if they don't, he has good cause to examine them. Why, then, should one act justly and love one's fellow men as oneself? I shall attempt to explain these things in a logical and scientific manner as best I can, but I think that their real verification for me has been in my experiences with other human beings.

A neurophysiologist attempts to explain human behavior in terms of nerve conduction, hormones, memory chemicals, etc. It is believed by practically all who work in this field that these constituents, played upon by the organism's external and internal environment, determine absolutely all of its thoughts and actions. Therefore, what a person thinks and what he does are not governed by any intrinsic goodness or badness, but by

1) the structure of the body with which he was born and 2) the physical changes which he has undergone as a result of his social interactions and other experiences. As with two clocks which tell the time differently according to the tensions in their respective main-springs, two men who think differently do so because of their differing physical states.

We say that one clock is wrong and the other is right, but actually both are operating perfectly in accord with their internal mechanisms. It cannot be any other way. Here, rightness is a matter of interpretation, and the clock which is aligned with the accepted standard is deemed correct. How shall rightness be decided between the two men? Here, as with the clocks, each man's thoughts are dictated by his condition, so rightness is again a matter of interpretation. But what absolute standard may be applied in this case? The question is confusing because of the many ways in which the word rightness is used. The case I shall confront will be the case in which one man seeks to impose his will over the other man and try him for his life - a case most relevant to war. Is he justified in this action?

Our initial premise was that each man acts as he must according to his experiences and make-up. It is clear that the man prosecuting the second man is acting as if this were not the case. He assumes that the other man could have acted differently than he did, and here the violation of our premise leads to tragic results - the death of an individual. The principle to be enunciated by this example is that one man shall not act in such a way that he disregards the natures of his fellow men.

As a man would be understood, so should he attempt to understand his fellow men.

I have attempted to show that the commandments of my God are in agreement with my studies of science. The preceding logical argument ended with the necessity of understanding my fellow man, but my God further dictates that I should love my fellow man. How shall I derive this?

I am afraid that this is where I must rely on my experiences, emotions, and faith in my beliefs. My faith in the power of love, though not intellectual, is not blind. I have been inspired in this belief by the examples of the martyrs of all religions, by such men as Jesus Christ, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, and negatively by the emotional vacuity which is bred by mere intellectual toleration or by stark objectivity. This is a faith which has also been supported by my own experiences. For a person who feels loved, understanding comes easily.

Although I have always abstained from violence on a personal level, I did not become involved in anti-War activities until I went to college. Since I was caught up in my studies of science and since the War and the Army all seemed very unreal and remote to me, I was somehow able to ignore them - such is the tiny world of the child. The roots of my present feelings were clearly growing during my childhood, but as with a living thing, the growth has been exponential as I have matured. The War has come to play a very real part in my life. Friends have been killed, jailed, or harassed and I have had to open my eyes to the world around me

and pass judgement upon it to determine my own course of action. To act according to what I have been taught, to walk in the ways of my God, I would have to understand fully his nature and have to reconcile it with all my facets, the scientific included. This I have been able to do, and now stand fully committed to the precepts of this paper.

II. Pertaining to the circumstances under which I believe the use of force is justified.

This is a difficult matter, and a complete answer would entail the consideration of many circumstances. Therefore, I will consider primarily the use of force in war, since this is our main topic of concern, and it is a case in which my religious beliefs give me clear and unquestionable direction. I am commanded by my God to love and understand my fellow man as I would be loved and understood myself.

When I am hungry, irritated, or frustrated, I am very well aware of the sources of my problems and can do something to alleviate them. When a child is hungry, its mother understands this and feeds it. When a psychiatrist treats a mentally abnormal individual, the doctor knows that something is wrong and seeks to correct it. How are sources of irritation corrected by war?

The men who compose the alleged enemy are individuals not unlike the men on my side. They can be lead to believe in annihilation of a race as a means of progress; they can be driven to desperate measures beyond reasoning by starvation;

and, of course, practically all of them, no matter how well-off, can be coerced into carrying a gun. Racism is fought by dialogue, starvation by sharing and working together, and the confused sense of values that abides in the individual who allows himself to be drafted against his will, by teaching and reasoned argument. If the men on the other side are like the men on my side, all doing what they must, then how can I kill one of them? He might have been my friend.

My friends who have been drafted or who have enlisted to fight in Vietnam are not bad people. They have followed an order of our government or have acted expediently in enlisting, not fully understanding the dreadful consequences of their actions. I pray that they are not killed and hope that they are never placed in the position of having to kill one of their enemy. He, too, is a man with friends and aspirations, who may have acted hastily or expediently.

In answer to your question, I would never under any circumstances use deadly force. A man who is a threat to others I would restrain until he was treated. In the case of a belligerent nation attacking the United States, I would campaign for a negotiated settlement, or, if this was not possible and I thought it wise, I might of my own volition act to immobilize its destructive power by aiding in the destruction of its armaments but never its people.

I have requested that I be exempted from both combatant and noncombatant service. The medic who heals the wounded in the field of battle is not acting to preserve life but to crush it. Furthermore, I do not feel that I could be coerced by any individual to be an accomplice to any destructive action. The "chain of

command" in an army is never conducive to healthy reasoning, and a person under orders is never free to act according to the dictates of his conscience.

Whatever other reasons wars are fought for, they are invariably fought for increase in material wealth. And yet wars must always reduce the total material wealth. What beastly madness!

III. The War in Vietnam, the possibility of nuclear war, my prospective career as a physician.

I have, thus far, only discussed violence in war in abstract terms. Yet, the war in Vietnam and the threatening possibility of thermonuclear holocaust are abominably concrete. As I have been lead to understand through my reading and lecture material, the involvement of our country in Vietnam is of a counter-revolutionary nature. We are seeking by exercise of our might to suppress a popularly-based movement to raise the standard of living of that country. In the course of this exercise we have placed one fourth of the population in detention camps, dropped a greater tonnage of bombs than was dropped in all of World War II, and before its end will have systematically destroyed the entire county- bombed it back to the Stone Age, in the words of one of our generals. As my religious beliefs do not permit me to participate in such an exercise, my patriotism demands that I attempt to halt my country in this evil endeavor. That in the war in Vietnam lies the possibility of the precipitation of massive thermonuclear war

does not even seem to have entered the minds of our politicians.

What image can the unexperienced human imagination conjure to convey the scope of destruction possible by nuclear force? At a panel discussion at M.I.T. on the ethics of weaponry in warfare, nuclear physicist Professor Morrison told a story of his experiences at Hiroshima to a representative from the Dow Chemical Company. A month after the leveling of that city by atomic bomb, Mr. Morrison was sent by our State Department to compile a report on the effects of the bomb. He spoke of concrete slabs upon which survivors had been laid, thousands of them covered with major burns, being cared for by a handful of doctors with simple ointments. Such was the impact of this discussion that I could think of little else for three days.

I do not now attend synagogue as regularly as I used to. I do not, however, feel that this is indicative of a loss of my religious convictions. Rather, I have been busy acting on those convictions, educating myself on the War, working to bring about its end, and pursuing my studies, which I fondly hope will enable me to contribute in some way toward the alleviation of human suffering and the furthering of human enlightenment.

Recently I have set my sights on the medical profession. Since high school I have been interested in human sensory capacities and the physiology of the brain, but I had planned to pursue this

interest in the academic rather than in the medical world. Among my reasons for this earlier preference was the nature of the respective educations, the academic being oriented toward explanation, the medical toward description. I have changed my plans because I think that a medical approach would serve one very important facet of my personality which would not be served as well by the other, namely, the need for human inter-relationships. This is something which I feel more and more, and, further, think that unless a neurophysiologist allows his work to be tempered by it, he is apt to neglect the finest and most subtle aspects of his subject. To treat the mind as an aggregation of pulse conductors and junctions is perhaps the most fruitful method of research, but it is not an approach which develops in one the senses of compassion, love, and understanding which are so important in the human community.

When shall it end, this pitting of brother against brother? With all the technological triumphs it is strange that men still support the practice of war, a thing which looms as a spectral anachronism in the twentieth century. Are men so bestial and unimaginative that they think there are no better activities to engage in than in killing one another?

I respectfully request that I be allowed to engage in some activity which is genuinely of benefit to the United States and which I can perform honorably before my God.

Robert Lawrence Blum
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