

'THE DETERRENT' DECONSTRUCTED

George Orwell helpfully raised awareness of the hidden dangers of *Nuspeak*. One of the most seriously dangerous uses, because abuses, of language is the now customary and widespread talk of 'the deterrent'. It rivals for linguistic danger 'the war on terror'.

In the first place, the highly abstract nature of the term 'the deterrent' (or even 'the nuclear deterrent') distracts attention from the concrete reality to which it refers, namely a large stock of a type of device designed to cause explosions of gargantuan proportions which are likely to cause a vast volume of almost unimaginable evils of human suffering and of social, political, economic and ecological damage and destruction. The clinical or technical sound of the term, with its implicit (and unargued) claim, that possession of this device deters potential aggressors, shuts attention off from the prior question whether causing such gigantic suffering, damage and destruction can ever be morally justified.

In the second place, the current use of the term 'deterrent' represents a misunderstanding and in effect a reversal of its original use in relation to this device. When the term was first employed in the context of the Cold War, the argument for possessing the device was that the possession by two opposing parties of roughly equal quantities of such appalling weapons would deter both parties from ever using them. Deterrence in that context could be anatomised as follows: 'Who are deterred?' 'Both parties.' 'What are they deterred from?' 'Using the weapons.' 'What deters them?' 'A combination of the unthinkable nature of the weapons and the equilibrium produced by the dual and approximately equal possession of them.'

The present usage of the term 'deterrent' in relation to nuclear weapons is quite different from that earlier and sophisticated use of it, which was an argument that equal possession by two parties of an appalling weapon would deter both parties from using it. The very different present usage is a reversion to the old, straightforward and unsophisticated meaning, in which A deters B from damaging A by threatening to damage B. There is nothing particularly modern or uniquely 'nuclear' about that. Such traditional deterrence through threat should be subject to the two traditional kinds of question, namely technical and moral ones, that is whether the proposed means will achieve the desired end and whether both the means and the end are morally desirable or justifiable – questions which are not now being seriously addressed by major policy makers.

The case for deterrence in the sense that obtained in the earlier context cannot be transferred to deterrence in the sense that obtains in the present context. The two usages stand for different kinds of deterrence, with quite different answers to the questions: who are deterred? what are they deterred from? what deters them? In the present context, it is any potential aggressor that is deterred, it is any act of aggression from which they are deterred, and it is the threatened use of nuclear weapons that is to deter them. This is a long way from two parties being deterred from using nuclear weapons by the combination of their appalling nature and their equal possession.

In addition to these fundamental differences in the syntax of the two usages are the differences in the context. Distinctive elements of the original context are gone. There were at least five of these: (1) the bipolarity in hegemony of two world-dominating powers; (2) the near-equality of weapon possession as between the two powers; (3) the mutuality of benefits and costs to them; (4) the sharp distinction, amounting to opposition, between weapon possession and weapon use, with equal possession deterring use. It is, however, the fifth missing element of the original usage and context which is perhaps the most important, namely the unthinkability of the weapons themselves.

Although the original deterrence argument became enshrined in official rhetoric and policy, it was by no means the consensus position. It was strongly contested on one or more of a variety of grounds, logical, psychological, sociological, historical and moral, with the result that with its codename, MAD, for Mutually Assured Destruction, its many opponents considered it mad indeed. However, though there was no consensus on this sophisticated notion of deterrence, there was considerable consensus between both opponents *and* supporters of this deterrence doctrine that the *use* of nuclear weapons was unthinkable. They shared that background assumption. This unthinkability had two elements: the appalling nature of *witnessing or suffering* such damage and destruction *and* the appalling nature of *causing* it. In other words, the unthinkability included a moral element; the use of nuclear weapons was unthinkable, in part because it was impermissible for responsible human beings to cause such havoc. Since advocates of nuclear deterrence in this sense of Mutually Assured Destruction shared that assumption of the unthinkability, including impermissibility, of the *use* of the weapons, they argued for *possession*, only on the basis that equal *possession* by two parties precluded such unthinkable *use*; the possession was thinkable, but the use was not, and the sole point of possession was to deter and prevent use. This may have been tortuous logic (and many at the time claimed that it was), but, whether tortuous or not, it presupposed the unthinkability of actual use.

The extreme danger of the present usage of the term and its incorporation in official rhetoric and policy is that that unthinkability, which was once a widespread assumption, if not a consensus position, has gone. Not only have the historical parameters of the Cold War doctrine gone, but more seriously, the unthinkable has become thinkable. As a result, the notion has become customary and (unthinkingly) thinkable that these devices constitute just one normal item, if the most powerful one, in a set of weapons which a state (or at least one's own state) can and should threaten to use *or actually use* against any group of human beings anywhere who may do or threaten things which are regarded by the state in question as potentially damaging to it.

This conversion of the unthinkable into the thinkable, which has been gradual and scarcely perceptible, is a highly dangerous and possibly fatal failure of the moral imagination which alone makes and keeps humans humane.

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