

the first of her regular contributions to Body and Soul, the philosopher Mary Midgley examines fear and deterrence

It is very remarkable how simply the calculations which nations now make for their safety rely on a special view of the psychology of fear.

How little considering the reliance, anybody ever seems to talk about it. Intelligent people who trust for the prevention of war to ever-increasing supplies of nuclear weapons, and modern weapons generally, ought, it seems to me, to find this a special study. I would very much like to hear their views about it.

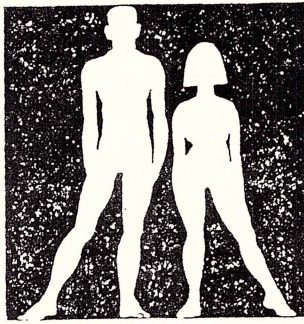
In the face of things, deterrence is an awkward business because it so easily tips over into provocation. Threats can always be seen as challenges which must be met. They can rouse dormant elements to resistance and double the efforts of ones already active. And threats above the minimum level do not commonly seem to provoke this response, rather than submission, in all but the exceptionally helpless.

Householders deter burglars in a stable, customary way, with locks and the background threat of the law courts. If they add spring-locks and mantraps and shade around shouting threats in what they take to be glorious neighbourhoods, they usually increase their danger rather than getting rid of it.

The fantastic increase of armaments since the Second World War illustrates this not very surprising fact. Neither side has ever responded in a way which the simple logic of deterrence demands, giving up and ceasing to compete. There is a fatal symmetry in the threat business. Each party reads the other's threats as active — as evidence of real intention to attack — but sees its own as passive, modest, non-provocative responses. Even if one is optimistic enough to be confident that the whole balance will never go off by a stroke, the logic of this development has to stop somewhere, before the economies of both sides are crippled by these non-productive expenses.

What is wrong with the thinking which makes the increase of weapons look like an effective deterrent? Its logic lies, I believe, in a distortion produced by the

# Who's afraid?



## BODY AND SOUL

complex psychology of fear. It is very difficult for us to believe in the fear of others, and this difficulty increases with every intensification of our own fear. Fear readily becomes obsessive, and all obsession blinds one to other people's feelings. Once we fear someone as an opponent, we tend to treat them as if they were a force of nature or a material object. And there is a simple, fatal difference between the kinds of resistance which can be used against lifeless forces or objects and the kind to be used against human opponents. It concerns communication.

When we build a sea-wall, we do not have to bother about its meaning because it cannot provoke the sea. Making it too thick does not matter. But with people, the meaning is crucial and excess can fatally distort it. This has often happened in penal deterrence. Cruel punishments often stiffen resistance and can lose essential support for those who use them. Yet they always seem to their users like effective measures, because they are physically strong and intense.

This well known mistake seems quite a close model for the cold war thinking which works to limit East-West communication to an exchange of complaints, threats, and the placement of more and more missiles. The trouble with

this system is not that the signals are meaningless, but that in the absence of other background communication their meaning can only be provocative.

Each step in the escalation is unilateral, in the sense that the other side was not consulted before it, any more than the sea is when we build a sea-wall — a kind of unilateralness which the people commonly called unilateralists mostly do not envisage for the reduction of weapons, since they propose that this reduction should form part of a general negotiation for reduction of threat.

If, by contrast, "multilateralism" means attempting to start arms reduction talks directly from the chilling background of escalation on both sides, it is useless, as repeated experiments have by now shown.

I find it very interesting that, when I talk like this, people tend to see the suggestion that the Russians might be capable of fear as a credulously sentimental one, as though fear were something confined to the virtuous, sensitive and amiable. If I suggest that special susceptibility to fear might have something to do with having been deeply and brutally damaged in the Second World War, and that this kind of damage usually produces fear rather than virtue, I still get dismissed as a credulous idealist. This seems to me strange reasoning.

I think that it is a great pity that no influential psychologist since Hobbes has paid much attention to fear, and that Hobbes was quite right to put it at the centre of the pernicious human tendency to struggle for power. This means that a tendency to heighten fear is always a defect in a policy, and huge fears, such as that of nuclear annihilation, are in themselves huge dangers, unpredictable in their operation, not safe, calculable instruments of policy.

Have I got this wrong? I very much wish that somebody who really accepts the current reliance on ever-deepening deterrence — not just as an occasional piece of crisis-management through sabre-waving, but as a regular, self-sufficient, central policy — would explain to me why they trust it and where they think it will end.