

# PACIFISM<sup>1</sup>

A WORD WITH CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS

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IN the first place, it ought to be "Pacifism" and "Pacifist." "Pacifism" is a hideous barbarism, apparently formed on the false analogy of "Passivism." However, no doubt we must conform to the common use of this ugly word.

The application of the Military Service Act is producing a fair number of people who refuse to serve under military law from conscientious motives. Their idea is that all war is morally wrong, that it is always wrong to take human life and inflict the other appalling horrors of war. Then, since they know that we may never do wrong that good may come of it (here for once they are right), they conclude that it would be sinful for them to bear arms or co-operate with war in any form. So they refuse to serve under military authority.

The root of the Pacifist's error is his confusion between moral and physical evil. To take human life is a very grave physical evil to the person whose life is taken. So are all the other horrors of war enormous physical evils. We all admit this. It does not follow that it is morally wrong to inflict these evils. There is, indeed, an entire difference between the concepts of these two kinds of evil. *Moral* evil is violation of any law I am bound in conscience to obey. But not all physical evil is moral evil. *Physical* evil means what

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in any way is harmful to anything. All evil is a negative concept ; so it cannot be defined except by its contradictory good. Physical evil is simply the destruction of any physical good. Take away, destroy any perfection in anything, and you have—so far—done physical evil. The greater the good you destroy the greater the evil you inflict. We can, and constantly do, inflict physical evil on things that have no life ; even so simple a process as to burn a coal for the sake of warmth means inflicting physical evil on that coal by destroying it. I inflict physical evil on myself every time I do anything unpleasant. Work, fatigue, pain, are all physical evils. No man can go through life for one day without inflicting physical evil on something.

To take life is a grave form of physical evil, because life is so great a good. The higher the life is, the greater the evil caused by destroying it. To take animal life is a greater evil than to take vegetable life. It is not really much of an argument to say that by taking life I take that which I can never restore, because this applies to nearly all forms of physical evil I may have to inflict. However, we admit at once that to take life, just because life is so precious a thing, is an acute form of physical evil. And human life? Certainly everyone will admit that human life is a very precious thing. Therefore, to take it is an enormous physical evil to the person slain. But no amount of physical evil, of itself, turns into that totally different category moral evil. If a man says that it is morally wrong, under any circumstances, to do this particular and very great physical evil, he must prove that. He cannot prove it on the basis that all physical evil is moral wrong ; because that basis is absurd. Still less can he prove it by confusing these two ideas, by speaking of "evil" in an ambiguous sense.

The ethical principles about inflicting physical evil come to this : first, you may never desire the physical

evil for its own sake. We need not trouble very much about this, because it is not only wrong ; it is impossible to do so. No man ever desires evil, not even the greatest criminal. It is a sound axiom of the schools that whatever evil a man may do, what he desires is always some real or apparent good, of which he conceives the evil as a means. The other principle is that it is only lawful when it is the necessary means to a correspondingly greater good. We may and do, all through life, cause physical evil in different forms ; but it is against the use of right reason to do so, unless thereby we gain a good which compensates, and more than compensates, for the evil. Otherwise the sum total of our action would be a balance on the side of evil ; such an action is immoral.

In the case of physical evil, then, we have a principle the exact contrary of that which governs the case of moral evil. You may never do moral evil, not even to gain a greater good. This is what the well-known axiom means, that "evil may not be done that good may come from it." That axiom applies to moral evil. In the case of physical evil, you may do it, if thereby you gain a greater good ; but only then, and only in as far as the evil is a necessary means.

In the matter of taking human life, then, the whole question resolves itself to this : is there any good greater than a man's life, so that I may kill him, if necessary, for the sake of that good ? The Pacifist implicitly says not. The idea which is the basis of his position is that human life is so precious a thing that no other good can ever compensate for its loss. If it were so, we should have to admit that the Pacifist is right. If human life is the supreme good, then no cause would justify a man in taking it. But the principle is false, and can be shown to be false.

There are, on the contrary, many good things which outweigh beyond measure the evil of the loss of one,

two, twenty, or even a million human lives. Human life is most precious, so that, certainly, only the very gravest cause can justify a man in taking it. That is not the issue between us and the Pacifist. The issue is whether it is the *supreme* good ; so that nothing can ever be more valuable. To think so is his mistake. The good estate, peace, civilization of a whole country is a greater good than a human life, or a number of human lives. It may be difficult in each case to measure the balance, to say exactly how many men's lives are equal to a certain other good. But the Pacifist's general principle is obviously false. When, for instance, the Huns, the real Huns this time, were over-running civilized Europe, to arrest the evils they were causing more than compensated for the loss of a number of Huns' lives. The Roman soldiers at Chalons were justified in taking lives, and in exposing their own, to save peaceful provinces of the Empire from the murder, rape, devastation that the Huns would otherwise cause. This is the issue in the question of every just war ; is the good for which we fight sufficiently great to justify us in allowing the evils of war, as a necessary means to it ? Of course it has not always been so. It would not be a sufficient reason to inflict so appalling an evil as war, merely to gratify the ambition of a Prince. This only means that not all wars are just. But there are good results which outweigh the evil of war, and so there are just wars.

That the Pacifist principle is wrong can be shown by a single example. What about a martyr ? Very few men would say that a martyr does wrong in giving his own life for a principle, or to save his country and friends from worse evils. No Christian could deny that the religious martyr does right, is worthy of all praise, when he gives his life for his faith. This shows that human life is not the supreme good. If it were, it would be just as wrong to give one's own life as to take

another's. Essentially, a human life is equal to a human life. A man is no more lord of his own life than he is of another's. If the Pacifist were right, all men who have given their lives for a cause would have committed sin. Perhaps he will say that the martyr does not take his own life, he only allows the tyrant to take it; therefore he is not responsible. But he is responsible. Apart from martyrs, there have been men who have done an action of which the direct result was the loss of their own life. They were justified, they were more than justified, if they did so for a greater good. The martyr too, who lets himself be killed, is responsible for what he does. If I know that the result of my doing or omitting a certain action will be my own death, it is foolish to say that I am not responsible. I am responsible for all foreseen results of what I do. A man may take that responsibility gladly, if he can plead that he allowed this physical evil to himself, as the necessary means to a greater good, such as not betraying his faith. The case of the martyr is conclusive proof that human life is not the supreme good.

We may put the argument for the lawfulness of just war simply like this: As a general principle, it is always lawful, it is often a duty, to inflict physical evil when this is the necessary mean for preventing greater evil, and when no obligation of natural or positive law is violated thereby. Neither philosophy nor the Christian faith teaches that physical evil does not exist or can cease to exist in this imperfect world. Nor did our Lord, among the gifts he brought us, ever claim that he included the end of all physical evil, of pain, sickness, death and war. Rather he foretells that, in spite of his religion of peace, "there shall be wars and rumours of wars," and the other dreadful evils of which he speaks in Matthew xxiv. Our duty, then, is always to choose the lesser of two evils. But

it may happen, it often has happened, that war is the lesser of two evils. Great as are the evils of war, it may be that war is the only means, the only natural means of avoiding still greater ill. Then, in that case, we may choose, we ought to choose war, grasping the sword with no more doubt as to the righteousness of our action than the surgeon in an analogous case grasps his knife. He too is about to inflict physical evil; yet he is justified because this is the only natural means of preventing greater evil.

The Pacifist constantly quotes the authority of Christ. Really, his idea of life on earth as the supreme good is incompatible with Christianity. If the unbeliever were right, if life on earth were all we have, even then it would not follow that the lives of a certain number of men are the supreme good. But that conviction would naturally greatly increase our sense of its value. Possibly a man who believes our life here to be the only one might come to this excessive idea of its value. The Christian cannot. To the Christian our life on earth is not the only one; it is not even the most important life. It is just a short time of preparation for that infinitely better life for which we look on the other side. To the Christian it does not matter so much how soon or how late he dies; what matters is that, when he dies, he should save his soul. Indeed, the saints have often said that they look forward to death, and hope for it soon, that they may then begin eternal life with God. "I desire to be dissolved and to be with Christ." Clearly then, the Christian religion, so far from encouraging this excessive valuation of life on earth, tends strongly to reduce our idea of its value. That humanitarianism, centred on the good things of the earth, counting such benefits as earthly life supreme, is characteristic of the vague unchristian philosophy so much in vogue among kindly people who have nothing better.

Does this principle, that life is *not* the supreme good, that we may give our life, or take another's, for a correspondingly greater good, does this mean that we may run about murdering anyone, if we see a greater good as the result of his death? Of course not. But the reason against murder is not that life is of supreme value. It is to be found in quite another principle. Namely, man is a sociable animal. It is clearly the will of God that he should live in society with other men. Therefore anything that is detrimental to the good of society is morally wrong. But licence to kill by private authority, except in the case of self-defence, would be ruinous to the peace and security of society. That is why it is wrong, and is forbidden by natural law. Conceive a society in which each man was free to judge for himself whether it would be advantageous to kill someone else. But the principle of maintaining peaceful society does not make it necessary to prevent the State from killing a man, in certain cases. So the State hangs murderers, and it gives to its soldiers the right to kill the enemy.

It is pitiful to see the Pacifist invoke the authority of our Lord for his views, when really the teaching of Christ is definitely against them. The Pacifist quotes many sayings of Christ, about the blessing of peace; to the effect that violence is, in itself, an evil; that to hurt your neighbour is a bad thing; that we must love our enemies, and do good to them. What follower of Christ doubts this? Who of us doubts that war is a terrible evil, that almost (but not quite) anything is to be borne rather than allow so great a misfortune to the world? All that is not to the point. The Pacifist would have to show that our Lord taught that war is *always morally wrong*, so that no excuse of any kind can ever justify it. Our Lord not only does not say that; he teaches the exact contrary. They quote such texts as: "Everyone who takes the sword shall perish by the sword"

(Matt. xxvi. 52). But that text, if it forbids anything, forbids violence by private authority. It was said to St. Peter when he tried to resist the authority of the State. As a matter of fact, it does not forbid anything. It is not a command, but a warning. It means, simply and as a matter of fact, that a man who fights and uses violence is in great danger of suffering violence himself. This is clearly a wholesome warning to all. It is an additional argument, showing that fighting is a great (physical) evil, and a danger to the fighter. It does not say that one may never inflict that physical evil—take the sword and, if need be, perish by the sword—for some greater good.

We must love our enemies, of course, even while we fight them. The object of our intention is not to hurt or kill them; it is to prevent the evils that would come to our country if the enemy conquered us, to obtain the advantages of conquest for our side, in a word, to win the war. To do this we must overcome their resistance, even by killing them. But the death of the hostile soldiers is not the object of war; it is only a means, a most regrettable, though necessary, means to the end. To desire the death of any man as an object or end is gravely immoral. We may never desire any evil, not even purely physical evil, as an end. The end for which our soldiers go to France is to defend us from the evil of being conquered. The means to that end is by no means necessarily the death of the enemy's soldiers. It is that, somehow, they be made incapable of further resistance. If this can be done by taking them unhurt as prisoners, so much the better. If the end can be achieved that way it becomes morally wrong to kill or wound them. And, save for the necessary physical evil he must inflict, the soldier is bound to do good to the enemy. The French priest-soldier, who shoots Germans, without hatred, because he must do so to save France; and then goes out to kneel beside the



man he has shot, to bring him to the ambulance, or hear his confession and pray with him till he dies—he understands our Lord's teaching better than the Pacifist.

We have, moreover, texts which prove the opposite of the Pacifist thesis. That thesis is, once more, that human life is the supreme good, so that no reason can justify us in taking it. What does our Lord say? "Fear not them who slay the body, but cannot slay the soul" (Matt. x. 28). Therefore there is a greater evil than death of the body, what he calls "death of the soul"; and death of the body is not to be feared in comparison with that. Clearly, then, death is not the supreme evil, life on earth is not the supreme good. Again, "Greater love than this no one has, that he should lay down his life for his friends" (John xv. 13). This, too, proves that, in the teaching of Christ, human life is not the supreme good. If it were, it would be just as wrong for a man to lay down his own life as to take another's. These texts, then, show the attitude of Christ as altogether different from that well-meaning but shallow and unreasoned impression that, whatever happens, you may never take life.

Our Lord shows too that it is lawful, in general, to inflict physical evil when this is the necessary means to prevent greater evil. He inflicted physical evil on the buyers and sellers in the temple when he drove them out with a whip.

Some Pacifists say that war is immoral because it is unnecessary. Their theory is that, if we used no physical force against our enemies, we should overcome them more effectively by spiritual means, by a Pacific protest or by some spiritual force that God would give us, if we had enough faith. To expect this is to expect miracles. No Catholic doubts that miracles happen, when God wills. But it is equally certain that we have no right to demand them or to count on them. In this

world God intends us to use natural means for natural ends. If it were true that by faith we could normally and habitually overcome physical evils, that fact would utterly change and overthrow the whole of the present order of Providence. The same theory would persuade us not to send for the doctor or take medicine when we are sick. But the theory is opposed to the Catholic faith concerning the terms on which God has placed us in this world, and it is opposed to all experience. It is one of those assertions which sound extremely well when urged eloquently in words, which, however, no normal person thinks of carrying out consistently in practice.

There is a last point which clinches the whole matter. If Christ had meant to include the Pacifist idea in his revelation, he would have said so. These modern theorists are so fond of claiming his authority for anything that seems good to them. We are told that Christ was a Socialist, a Democrat, an Anarchist, a Communist. The answer is the same in all cases. Where does he teach any of these things? He taught plainly enough. If he had meant any of these theories he would have said so. It is no good at all to quote general principles about kindness, charity, love of our neighbour, which we all admit, which have nothing to do with the question. So in this case, if our Lord had meant to teach us that all war is immoral, so that under no circumstances should his follower fight, he would have said so. He does not say so. On the contrary, he accepts war without a protest, as one of the necessary evils of this world. There are many cases of soldiers, professional fighting men, who approach him. If their trade were essentially immoral, Christ would be bound to tell them so. Where does our Lord say that it is a sin to be a soldier? On the contrary, when the Centurion comes to him, our Lord says that he has not found such faith in Israel (*Matt.* viii. 10). There is not a word against the Centurion's profession.

Was not the Baptist a faithful prophet of his Master? When soldiers come to him and ask what they should do, if he had been a Pacifist he ought to have told them at once that their trade is immoral, that they must raise conscientious objections against it, and go to prison rather than serve under military law. What he does say is: "Strike no one, make no calumny, and be content with your pay" (Luke iii. 14). To strike no one, of course, means that they are not to bully peaceful citizens—excellent advice for soldiers—and they are to be content with their pay. Clearly their profession, for which they are paid, is not immoral.

Do we need further texts? Here is one final one. When trouble was coming and it would be necessary to use our natural right of self-defence, our Lord told his Apostles that "he who has none shall sell his tunic and buy a sword" (Luke xxii. 36). It would be impossible to recognize more explicitly that a man, in certain circumstances, has a right to fight.

A last and most curious argument of the Pacifist is this: Christ did not resist the Roman tyranny by force. So, by his example, he teaches Pacifism.

Now there would be a good deal to say in answer to this. One of the most conspicuous things in the gospels is our Lord's complete indifference, we might even say his scornful indifference, to all political affairs of this world. He accepts the Roman Empire and all other such political circumstances with unquestioning indifference, paying tribute to Cæsar, recognizing Pilate's jurisdiction—while he, for his part, preaches the Kingdom of God. It is simply absurd to imagine our Lord exchanging his mission as Saviour of the world for that of the leader of a Jewish rebellion against the Romans. It is hardly less absurd to think that one can get capital for general Pacifism from the fact that Christ was not a kind of Bar-Kochba.

The truth of the matter is that this Pacifist movement

is not Christian, and is not reasoned from any point of view. It is an example of the good-natured but cloudy thinking which dislikes admitting anything unpleasant. That war, with all its horrors, is a very dreadful thing, who would deny? The question is whether there are not still worse evils; whether to escape them it is not sometimes lawful, even necessary, to inflict the curse of war. It is. Every man who thinks the matter out reasonably must admit that it is.

The Pacifist is the man who does not think the matter out reasonably. He sees, he is very conscious of, the horror of war. Unaccustomed to argue a question out calmly, he sees these horrors much more vividly than the abstract general principles for which a nation may have to fight. He lets his imagination and instinct guide him instead of reason. So the idea of our civilization at stake moves him much less than the picture of a dying soldier. He is a typical example of the danger of letting imagination take the place of reason, and a warning to all of us against judging grave questions by their immediate appearance.