

Ethics in a Democratic State
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I bring you greetings from the United States, where its citizens have been closely following the events of the past three weeks. There has been a great change in the feelings of common American people towards the Russian people. Many have expressed their sense of identity and solidarity with the people of Moscow and St. Petersburg as they witnessed the resistance for the attempted coup. Americans have enormous respect for constitutional government as well as for democracy, and they saw the coup as unconstitutional from the start.

A major factor was the television news service. The major American broadcast networks — NBC, CBS, ABC — and the cable networks, especially CNN — provided often live coverage throughout the days and nights of events in the streets and squares of Moscow, and later in the halls of the Soviet and Russian Parliaments. We witnessed press conferences, from one with the committee of 8 to one 3 nights ago in which Boris Yeltsin and Mikhail Gorbachev spoke with the American people. We made our individual judgments about events, often listening to debates between experts and scholars on Soviet affairs — some Russian, some Ukrainian, some from the Baltic states — and we spoke frequently and freely with one another — even some of discussions with our friends were televised.

We experienced fear and dread as it seemed great military forces were being brought to bear on your White House. We wept with grief and rage as the deaths of Russians confronting tanks were reported. We cheered to see Russian women scolding soldiers in the streets.

In the aftermath, there has been much discussion of Russia's needs and how Americans might help. In that curious mixture of avarice and beneficence that is the way of American business, discussions were held on starting a restaurant, and import service, on how to use rubles to pay for local expenses and hard currency for profit-taking.

I'd like to relate some of this brief review of American reactions to my topic, ethics in a democratic state, for some of what I shall defend as dominant ethical principles of a democratic state are illustrated in these events and our reactions to them.

The first element of the commitment to democracy is the primacy or autonomy of the individual. I see this as an expression of what Harvard

University philosopher John Rawls calls “the thin theory of the good.” On this view, ‘good’ is not determined fully by some objective set of values; it is determined in the experiences and preferences of beings capable of choice and valuation. The thin theory — that part of the theory of the good that *is* objective — concerns the conditions for individual valuation. These conditions ultimately turn on the autonomy of the individual, the ability to rule oneself, to act as one pleases in all matters.

Inherent in autonomy of the individual, viewed as one among many, is the restriction known as the harm principle. One’s liberty may be legitimately restricted to prevent harm to others of the sort that would limit or impair their autonomy. This harm principle — the second of those I hold to constitute the principles of ethics in a democratic state — is sometimes called the principle of nonmaleficence.

Autonomy-limiting factors originate not only in the malevolence of others. Liberty is limited by injury and disease, and by physical and mental factors such as hunger and homelessness, and by ignorance, and mental illness. Recognition of this fact, together with a commitment to the primacy of the individual, leads to the third great ethical principle of democratic states — the principle of beneficence. Beneficence has been explicated by the American philosopher William Alston as implying a commitment to preventing harms from occurring, to reducing or eliminating occurrent harms, and to working to secure or enable optimal functioning of the individual. But note in this last regard that individual optimal functioning is not an objective concept — for that would require a move to a thick theory of the good; it is a subjective concept. In our ethical theory it is a place-marker for the individual’s autonomous self-definition, for the fashioning and pursuit of a self-ideal.

Let me therefore return to the Americans’ reaction to the events of the past three weeks. Americans believe that Perestroika and Glasnost represent the emergence of a longing for democracy — for individual freedom and autonomy. They perceived the actions of the Committee of 8 to be a violation of that central tenet of autonomy, both for Gorbachev and for those he represents. They feared as well that he would be personally harmed. That fear extended to the Russian people as well, as the tanks and troops were reported to be moving into Moscovia.

Let me now briefly touch on some of the tensions which occur within this view of ethics in a democratic state. The first, obviously, occurs between the visions or completions of the good. The thin, minimal theory of the good permits multiple or plural completions; such pluralism can involve clashes of beliefs. Unless one is sensitive to the theoretical basis for such pluralism, those clashes may become very serious and strident. We today witness in the U.S. such a clash over the issue of abortion on demand. Those Americans who believe, usually based on religious grounds, that the fetus is a human person from the point of conception, view any instance of abortion that is not needed to

save the life or health of the mother to be immoral, tantamount to murder. Those who do not recognize the unborn fetus as a human person hold that a woman should have the right not to be pregnant, and that right is stronger than any interest the state might have in children being delivered. Passions are so strong that, even though our courts have found a basis in our constitution for protecting the woman's right to terminate a pregnancy during the first 6 months of pregnancy without medical justification, the view of those whose thick theory of good includes embryos and fetuses as bearers of rights clashes with those whose thick theory of good does not accord such moral standing to unborn humans. The result is a constant political battle, and individuals who become frustrated with the slow pace of democratic deliberation sometimes violate the harm principle in their pursuit of what they see to be the full scope of the principle of beneficence.

The second problematic with ethics in a democracy turns on the question of whether autonomy shall be recognized in all persons at all times, or whether to treat it as a defeasible presumption. A revolution in our mental health system in the 1960s resulted in nearly all mentally ill persons who did not clearly pose the threat of harm to themselves and to others to be released from mental institutions. Although medication and other health services are available for them, by treating them as autonomous individuals we have given them the choice of whether to accept such treatment. Many do not, and many lapse into paranoia and other anti-social forms of behavior. The result is that we have a large population of unemployed, roaming, homeless individuals who sleep in our parks and on our streets, who beg for food, and who constitute an aesthetically offensive and politically embarrassing problem. Yet, that problem is one of the products of extending autonomy to all persons at all times.

The third problem with our democratic ethics has to do with how robust an interpretation we should give to the principle of beneficence. Does it imply a state commitment to universal health care? If so, to what standard: a minimum one seeking only the absence of significant disease or disability for every citizen, or to the World Health Organization standard of health: total physical and mental well-being. Currently, the United States stands alone among democratic, industrial societies in not providing universal health care for its citizens. We have a complex system of health care benefits that provides emergency treatment at public expense where other coverage is not available, and provides state-sponsored coverage for certain classes of individuals (elderly, children of single parents), but leaves some 30 million Americans without coverage for their ordinary health needs.

As you move to a state constituted around more democratic ideals, and away from a state structured around the guarantee of employment, housing, health care, food by the government, these may well be some of the issues you will have to confront. To what extent will you treat all individuals as

autonomous, with both the right and the responsibility to see to their own affairs? Will you retain your strong commitments to beneficence? And how will you protect and further nonmaleficence in the face of those who will seek as individuals to dominate the economy and the economic affairs of their fellow citizens through criminal activity.

We hope that Russians can learn from the American experience. We know we will watch you as you restructure your society, and will learn from your efforts.