

Good, Evil and Energy

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Abstract: None available.

Full Text: INTRODUCTION (Ed) The following article is reprinted here from, Hydroscope, November 22, 1985 by permission of Ontario Hydro. In my estimation, though the article deals with energy choices, it also applies to the ethical issues within our own sphere of interest such as pre-natal diagnosis, abortion and third party conceptions. The Journal would welcome your views. In this decade, religious statements on energy choices have been sprinkled with the principles of justice, participation, and sustainability-or their equivalents. The debate has focussed on nuclear energy, and all attempts to apply ethical principles have proven to be inseparable from, among other things, discussions of reactor safety and decommissioning, the production and storage of radioactive wastes, health and safety in uranium mines, and the capital costs of nuclear power. This circularity has frequently led some frustrated engineers to complain that these are technical, not moral, issues. It has also led some frustrated moralists to say that energy choices are an ethical, not a technical, matter. If the ethicists sometimes find themselves confronted with contradictory technical information, and therefore assert that "the experts disagree," a similar problem confronts technologists faced with unclear, and sometimes contradictory, ethical principles and arguments. It is not surprising, therefore, that the ethics and energy debate frequently ends in impasse; religious perceptions of nuclear energy have varied from seeing it as a gift of God to seeing it as inherently evil. Differing assumptions and processes have led to different conclusions.

Basis of Debate The themes of good and evil are the basis of most ethical debate. It is frequently assumed that everyone knows the difference between good and evil, and that they can be separated in such a way that we can have one without the other. In practice, it has proven easier to talk of good and evil in the abstract than to get agreement on the moral choices of daily life. The notion that good and evil are opposing forces in conflict and that we can have one without the other has led to many philosophical problems. If 2,000 lives are lost by the bursting of a hydro-electric dam, then the cause can be laid at the feet of human failure or folly. It is not so easy to provide an answer when 10,000 lives are lost as the result of a typhoon in the Bay of Bengal. Such events are frequently labelled "inexplicable acts of God." It is the discrepancy between our everyday experience of good and bad as inextricably intertwined, and our assumptions concerning the absolute and opposing natures of good and evil, which lead to the question of the problem of evil. It is easy to overlook the fact that there are fundamentally different cultural ways of looking at good and evil. Religions such as Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, see Good and Evil as opposing forces in conflict. Each of these religions has stories of a last great battle in which the forces of Good decisively and finally defeat the forces of Evil. Thereafter, Good exists alone, in isolation, without the presence of its opposite. These stories derive, ultimately, from Zoroastrianism. It was Zarathustra (Zoroaster in Greek) who portrayed Good and Evil as opposing forces in conflict. This notion has permeated our culture-religious and secular alike. Seen as Opposites There are other cultures which do not share these assumptions and have no notion of good and evil as forces, let alone as forces in conflict. A good example is the Chinese culture and associated religions in SouthEast Asia. This culture understands good and evil in the same way it understands male and female, or hot and cold. These are not seen as forces in conflict, but are seen as opposites more or less in harmony: you can't have one without the other. Taoism, for example, understands nature as a creative union of opposites. In Taoist culture, and others like it, the way of nature is perceived as the way of harmony of yin and yang. In our culture, and others like it, the way is perceived as a way of force; a conflict of opposites culminating in a great, final battle. The cultural understanding of the harmony of opposites, including what we call good and evil, results from the

everyday experience that everything has advantages and disadvantages. The good and bad, the rough and the smooth, are inextricably mixed in the relationships of nature. Almost any relationship in nature can be made to look bad if we look selectively at its disadvantages. It was St. Augustine who said that "what appears to be evil, when seen in isolation or in a too limited content, is a necessary element in a universe which, viewed as a totality, is wholly good." Since all alternatives have advantages and disadvantages, the best alternative is likely to be a middle way. There is an optimum of advantage; an excess of advantage in one area is likely to be disadvantageous in another. Moral Choices Moral choices, the choices of the good, cannot be made in isolation from consideration of circumstances which actually exist at the time, and the alternatives which are desirable and possible. All real choices are between possible alternatives. In energy choices, for example, the containment of radioactive wastes should be considered in the context of the release to the atmosphere of the combustion products of fossil fuels. Health and safety in uranium mines should be considered in the context of health and safety in coal mines, and in gas and oil recovery. The consequences of the normal and abnormal operation of these and other energy sources, including hydroelectric, should be compared using the same criteria. Even the so-called renewable sources of energy have disadvantages as well as advantages. The widespread burning of wood has led to deforestation and atmospheric pollution. The use of solar panels on the roofs of houses and other buildings can lead to accidental deaths and disabling injuries at all points in the cycle-resource extraction, transportation, manufacture, installation, and, especially, maintenance. All alternatives have advantages and disadvantages. Since over-reliance on any one energy source would be disadvantageous, an acceptable energy mix will include all of the sources which are adequately advantageous. The mix of energy sources which is good for Ontario may not be good for New Zealand, and the mix which is good for New Zealand may be bad for the British Isles. The different assumptions regarding the nature of good and evil lead to different processes and different conclusions in the energy debate and other controversies. The assumption that good and evil are forces in conflict will result inevitably in a polarized debate when discussion of "moral issues" takes place. One side of such a debate will stress the disadvantages of a particular option and the other side will stress the advantages. At least one side in such a debate is likely to seek to force the other into submission; it is a conflict between good and evil. Such a debate is likely to seek impossible, perfect solutions rather than solutions that are possible and good enough. Need for Respect The understanding that there is a mixture and harmony of both good and bad, advantage and disadvantage, throughout the world of nature is more likely to lead to dialogue, the exchange of information and viewpoints in an atmosphere of respect and goodwill. This approach may have many disadvantages, but it is unlikely to result in a last great battle with the loss of most, if not all, options. There is a great need for respect and good-will in the ongoing dialogue on society, ethics, and technology. It was the World Council of Churches report on energy options which called this "an area of discussion rife with misunderstanding, mistrust, and polarization" and called on all people of goodwill to commit themselves to the dialogue with an openness of mind and spirit. AuthorAffiliation Tom Dowell, B.A., B. Sc., P. Eng. AuthorAffiliation Tom Dowell, a professional engineer with a degree in religious studies, is, through his company Energy Exchange, promoting dialogue on energy matters.

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