

REPLY TO PERKINS ON “CONDITIONAL PREVENTIVE WAR”

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In “Russell and Preventive War”,¹ Ray Perkins, Jr. takes me to task for being overly harsh in my comments on Russell’s political suggestions vis-à-vis the Soviet Union from 1945 through 1948. In my view Russell called for preventive war with Russia, in Perkins’ view “this is a coarse interpretation ... [Lackey] like Ryan ignores the fact that Russell apparently did not think that what he was advocating would involve war” (p. 138).

Now I admit that compared with Perkins’ analysis my account is coarse-grained: Perkins makes many moral distinctions which I do not introduce into my analysis. The trouble is that I do not see how Perkins’ distinctions are morally relevant to the evaluation of anyone’s behaviour, including Russell’s. Perkins’ main distinctions are (1) a distinction between an unconditional call for war and a conditional call for war, and (2) (in the case of conditional calls for war) a distinction between cases in which the agent believes that it is likely that the conditions for war will be met, and cases in which the agent believes that it is not likely that the conditions for war will be met. Perkins argues that Russell never called for *unconditional* preventive war, and that Russell’s call for conditional preventive war was excusable on the grounds that he believed that the conditions for war would not be met.

¹ Ray Perkins, Jr., “Russell and Preventive War”, *Russell*, n.s. 14 (winter 1994): 138, commenting on D. Lackey, “Russell’s Contribution to the Study of Nuclear Weapons Policy”, *Russell*, n.s. 4 (1984): 243–52.

1. Perkins seems to believe that there really are such things as unconditional intentional commitments to war. But an action is intentional if it is aimed at some goal, and the person who undertakes an intentional action usually believes when he acts that his goal will be obtained. No one is going to perform an intentional act if he thinks that the act will surely fail. So all intentional actions have conditions, explicit or implicit, and Perkins' distinction between "unconditional preventive war" and "conditional preventive war" is in fact vacuous; there are no such things as unconditional preventive wars.

2. Now in the case of conditional preventive wars Perkins lays great stress on whether the agent believes that the conditions for action will occur. This seems hardly relevant compared to the moral weight of the action that is in view. Suppose that Jones is a serial killer, and has resolved to murder the next girl he meets who is wearing a pink polka dot dress. His intentions are immoral, even if he thinks that the chance of meeting a girl wearing a pink polka dot dress is quite small. Suppose Jones thinks that the chance of meeting such a girl is five percent, whereas Smith, also a serial killer, has resolved also to kill such girls and believes that the probability of meeting one is ten percent. I would say that their degree of wickedness is quite the same, and that this wickedness is gauged by the character of what they have conditionally resolved to do, not by the probability they believe the conditions to have.

Furthermore, if one is going to evaluate conditional intentions by reference to the probability of the conditions, one should focus on the actual probability of the conditions, not their perceived probability. In the case of my serial killers, suppose that there is a craze for polka dots, and the actual chance of meeting someone so dressed is fifty percent, rather than five percent. Then if Jones ventures out on the street there is a fifty percent chance that he will do murder, even if he believes that there is only a five percent chance that he will do murder. For a utilitarian, the fifty percent chance of harm is the morally relevant factor, not the five percent, and I suspect that an analogous focus on the real probability could be worked into non-utilitarian theories as well. What matters in Russell's case, then, is not what he believed the probability of war would be, but what it actually would be given such threats.

There is a neglected duty in ethics to collect information relevant to one's actions, and to make rational assessments of probabilities, including the probabilities that the conditions of one's intentions will be met.

If an epistemically lazy person has neglected to collect information, or if he has deviant views about casual relations, he might come up with an irrational belief that the conditions of his evil intentions will never be met. But that should not exonerate the lazy agent who forms such evil intentions, if they have been formed in the absence of readily obtainable information and in a social setting where reasonable beliefs about causation are readily available. Once again, mere beliefs about probabilities are not morally relevant.

There is another feature of the ethics of belief that concerns cases where information that would indicate the probability of the conditions is simply not available. If information is not available, the agent is not entitled to proceed as if it were. In the case at hand, Russell had very little information about how the Soviets would react to such conditional threats. I suspect that Perkins also has very little information about how the Soviets would have reacted to a real threat of nuclear attack between 1945 and 1946. Certainly he and Russell would have to admit that, if such a threat had been credibly made, the chances of a major war in Europe were higher than they were in the absence of such threats.

What Russell was proposing was what Thomas Schelling has called compellance: "do this, because if you don't, I will punish you." Now such threats will only have an effect if the adversary believes that if he doesn't comply, you will indeed punish him. So if Truman had said to Stalin in 1946, "hands off Poland, or I will drop the bomb on you", this would have had an effect only if Stalin believed that Truman was not bluffing. I suspect that the only way Stalin could have been led to believe this was for Truman to be publicly and irrevocably committed to carrying out the threat. So Russell's suggestions, had they been implemented, would have involved either ineffective bluffs or murderous commitments. Neither alternative is morally admirable.

My objective in replying to Perkins in not to take Russell to task again. Fortunately, Russell's suggestions were ignored and no harm came of them. My problem with Perkins' distinctions is that they could be put to ill use by people who have real power, as Russell did not. Those who ran the deterrence establishment for many years argued that nuclear threats were morally permissible, on the grounds that there was very low probability that they would ever have to be carried out, while good things came of making these threats. For years I argued that the fact that the probability is believed to be low is irrelevant to morally assessing the

intention behind the threat, and that in any event those who made these claims about probabilities had no rational grounds for assuming that the probabilities were as low as they thought they were. It is ironic that Perkins has defended Russell with distinctions adopted decades later to promote the system of nuclear deterrence.