

Thoughts about the "lesser of two evils"

The Bible says that the doctrine that you can do evil as long as you intend a result that is worth it is unChristian and to be rejected. Paul addressed that doctrine in the Epistle of the Romans. Jesus advocated a rigid goodness that demanded you love your enemy and do good even to the enemies of other people. There was no concern that giving a knife to Jack the Ripper as a gift will be used on innocent women.

You have a knife. You can stab the tyrant with it who is about to start a war that will wipe out civilians only. There are two evils on offer. Murdering the tyrant. Letting him murder others. The lesser evil is killing him. It is obvious what you need to do.

Some philosophers believe in the law of double effect. It tells you to do the good thing and says the disastrous side effects are not your fault. So it would say murdering the tyrant is evil and cannot be done. You must do the good thing and let him live and the side-effects, the wars, are nothing to do with you. It is up to him to become a man of peace.

Yet our natural instinct is that he should be killed.

Some say the law of double effect is just another way of saying choose the least of two evils. That fails to understand the law. The law is about choosing the good not the lesser evil. The principle of double-effect is about choosing good but not the bad side effects that come with it. It is not about choosing the lesser evil or the best of two evils.

But there are situations where there is no good but only one of two equal evils or one of two unequal evils has to be chosen. A president who believes in double effect would sell arms to a country that would use them to destroy the innocent on the basis that it is good to sell a country arms so it can defend itself. The president would say by giving the arms he is not telling the country to kill the innocent and will argue that if the country has done terrible things with the weapons until now it does not mean it will do it in the future.

We don't need anything other than the newscaster to tell us that the principle of double effect will leave us all dead in the name of religious sanctimonious posturings. The double effect doctrine is a central and indispensable Christian doctrine and thus is sufficient to justify opposition to Christianity and refusing to be charmed by its deadly love.

Many want revision of language in relation to doing the lesser evil. They say, "Stop saying lesser of two evils for it is the lesser of two disappointing choices."

We do not always get very good choices.

Often we have to choose one of two things and both seem bad or evil. We say we have to choose the lesser of two evils.

The danger with that kind of thinking is that you see yourself as doing evil if you make the choice. Why not see yourself as doing something necessary but disappointing?

If you see it as evil you may feel, "I don't have to do evil to x but I may as well for sometimes I have to choose between two evils anyway. It is no big deal."

Or it can lead to you refusing to make the choice for either choice is evil even if one is the lesser evil. The fact of the matter is that if you have to decide which of two tyrants and crooks to vote for and you do not vote you are still involved so you may as well have voted. The worst crook and tyrant could still become the leader of your country and you have let that happen by not voting for the better candidate.