Chapter Forty-Two

Mr Wilson’s Pragmatism


Suppose that, late in the year 1969, someone was still able to believe about ‘the alleged atrocities at My Lai’ that it was open to argument ‘whether it was an incident – an aberration, an obscene incident – or whether it was endemic in this kind of war’. What kind of person could this be? It would have to be someone who had read none of the countless reports of the air war, of the numerous strafings of unidentified South-Vietnamese peasants, none of the anguished accounts brought back by disillusioned veterans of casual killings on the ground, someone simply ignorant of the effects of modern fire-power often used not even on the enemy but on ostensible allies. That is to say, it would presumably be someone who had no access to the best American or European newspapers, let alone to the writings of I.F. Stone. We can now picture him, perhaps an untravelled inhabitant of a small Kansas town, sheltered from reality by a local Republican newspaper, authentically upset at last by the news of My Lai. But, alas, this was not who it was who went on record in the words

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quoted above. It was in fact the Right Honourable J.H. Wilson, then Prime Minister of Great Britain.

How had he come to be sheltered from reality so successfully? A great part of the importance of Mr Wilson’s memoirs lies in the extent to which they enable us to answer this question. We get one clue in his discussion of the problem of the Kenya Asians. Mr Wilson represents the moral dimensions of this problem as being simply a matter of balancing a humanitarian regard for the Kenya Asians against the political costs of a breach in his own government’s immigration policy. It does not seem to occur to him either more particularly that this was a question of Britain dishonourably reneging on her pledged word, or more generally that the importance of the strong and the powerful keeping their promises to the weak and powerless was what was at stake. That Mr Wilson should fail even to recognise the character of the moral issue is less surprising, however, when we come to consider his account of the moral issues involved in the Vietnamese and the Biafran conflicts:

Peace, freedom and self-determination are all ends in themselves. But they are ends that conflict with one another; where judgment is necessary, but where there can be no certainty of finality of judgment. So, considerations are weighed in some arbitrary utilitarian scale: how many millions of Biafrans have to die before the need to preserve Nigerian unity (unargued by Mr Wilson except for a reference to the dangers of tribalism in Africa, a danger which he never shows would have been increased by an independent Biafra), and the fact that the Russians would have sold the Nigerians the arms if we had not done so, are outweighed? This appears to be Mr Wilson’s view of how moral problems are to be posed. Now, the most obvious aspect of this view of morals is that it proposes to weigh moral incommensurables in the balance and hence every outcome is arbitrary; and this leaves the agent subject to any and every pressure of power and interest. This particular moral outlook is therefore peculiarly well-designed to deceive oneself and others about the way in which such pressures operate.

Are we then to discern behind Wilson the moralist, whose pompous self-adulatory manner in these memoirs is reminiscent of Gladstone, although only

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