Concerns Over Communism

With reference to Harry T. Larson’s piece in the May/June issue, I believe that communists are made pretty much out of the same basic raw materials as are capitalists, that they walk erect, have no horns or tails, and are possessed of a human shape and a human mind with the same fundamental anthropoid drives and instincts (or lack thereof); in short, that they, too, are human. I believe that communists by and large think that their model of what it means to be human is the correct one and that their behavior is in the best interests of the species. I do not believe that communists roll out of bed each morning saying to themselves, “Now, let me see, what evil can I perpetrate today?”

Unfortunately, history and environmental factors have given communists and capitalists different ideas of what constitutes an appropriate political and economic system. I can imagine that many engineers in communist countries wrestle with questions of the morality of their professional pursuits and wind up justifying their work on “systems that kill” in the same terms that Mr. Larson used, only with the roles reversed.

To be perfectly honest, I don’t know whether I have ever laid eyes on a real live communist, but if I am right that they are flesh and blood, then we have a situation in which men and women on the two sides are using identical arguments to convince themselves that building weapons of destruction is necessary to assure survival of the home system. I will not quarrel with that here, provided that the implicit assumption is made explicit—that survival of the home system is a goal for which it is worth risking survival of the species.

I suggest that our failure to be explicit about goals is at the root of many of the problems that beset us today. This is certainly not a new thought with me, but our technological advances make it daily more important to drum in the message. Entire codes of morals tumble in the wake of new technological applications—the changes wrought by the pill, as a very clear example. To paraphrase Norbert Weiner on the subject, as it becomes more and more possible for man to achieve any outcome he chooses, it becomes more and more necessary for him to be explicit about what outcomes he desires.

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Editor’s Note: According to Mr. Kean, “Techno/culture Institute is a non-profit corporation working to improve the quality of the dialog between the scientific and lay communities so that in the long run technology can consistently contribute to human objectives. First it is necessary to stimulate public thinking about objectives; Techno/culture Institute has several projects in mind and would welcome contact by anyone having similar interests.”

Thinking About Applications

Harry T. Larson (P.O.V., Computer, May/June 1972) is correct in identifying the oath proposed in S. H. Unger’s article (The Need for Heroes, Computer, Jan/Feb 1972) as controversial and difficult to implement. However, his critique of it is lacking in logic. The oath says “I will not use my scientific training for any purpose which I believe will be used to the harm of any human being”, the emphasis being mine. Larson’s critique begins by overemphasizing the difficulty in applying the oath. By paragraph seven in his article he is talking about a purpose about which one “can be sure it won’t be used to harm any human being”. This straw man is easy for him to knock down.

To Larson’s credit, he does reveal his real reasons for objecting to the oath: that the ends justify the means if that end is preservation of the American way of life, and that “Communism” is bent on complete world domination. Certainly, anyone with these beliefs (or analogous ones substituting other “isms”) will find the oath distasteful, to say the least.

I think Larson is on firmer ground when he implies that many decisions involve some sort of tradeoff between good and bad. The oath is imprecise in the phrase “harm of any human being”. I doubt that it means to inhibit all action or invention. There should be a distinction between tools and applications, using Larson’s examples between building a general purpose computer and its application to nuclear warfare simulation. The value of an oath such as this is to encourage technologists to give serious thought to the applications of their work. Not only is such thinking good for the psyche, it might even lead to the redirection of some efforts to better payoffs for mankind.

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