

# Justified? An Analysis of Ethics Concerning the Nuclear Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

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On August 6, 1945 at exactly 8:15 AM, the first atomic bomb was dropped on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. Approximately 70,000 civilians were killed instantly and another 70,000 would die in the days and weeks following the bombing due to the radioactive fallout created by the nuclear weapon. This bombing and the subsequent bombing of Nagasaki three days later would lead to almost a quarter of a million people being killed by only two weapons. The result of these bombings would be the end of the Second World War. In a time of war, even a just war, is the targeting of cities and civilians, particularly with such devices as nuclear weapons, in order to bring about the surrender of an aggressor compatible with Christian morality? The purpose of this essay is to discover whether the particular cases of the Hiroshima/Nagasaki bombings were ethically justified; could the principle of double effect have been applicable in these cases? Ultimately, it can be demonstrated that the act of bombing these two cities did not meet the conditions of the principle of double effect and was an unjust act.

For every good act that can be performed, it is possible for there to be an evil effect that is accidental to the good act. The good effect sought in the act of bombing Hiroshima is the end of the war obtained by the surrender of an unjust aggressor so that there may be peace between nations. In any war however, there will more than likely be innocent lives lost; non-combatants who die as a result of the fighting. However, it is never permissible to intentionally slaughter the innocent as stated by St. Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica*.<sup>1</sup> It would seem impossible then for there to be a just war as innocents would most likely die. The principle applied in this and other similar situations is the principle of double effect; a rule in moral theology that determines when it is lawful for an action to be performed from which two effects, one bad and one good, will follow.<sup>2</sup>

One of the early visions of the principle of double effect can be found in the writings of St. Thomas

Aquinas. When considering the morality of an act that may have several effects, it is the intention of the act that counts:

Nothing hinders one act from having two effects, only one of which is intended, while the other is beside the intention. Now moral acts take their species according to what is intended, and not according to what is beside the intention, since this is accidental.<sup>3</sup>

The Angelic Doctor explains this principle when speaking of the act of self-defense which raises the question of whether it is moral to slay an aggressor who threatens one's life. He states that a person may kill an aggressor in order to save his own life though one may not intend to kill the aggressor but only to stop him. If the force required to stop the aggressor takes his life, the defender is not guilty of the bad effect that was an unintended effect of the good act of self-defense.<sup>4</sup>

These principles of act and intention that St. Thomas discusses are reflected in the four conditions necessary, according to Catholic morality, for the principle of double effect to be applicable to an action. The first two of these conditions are that the "act itself must be morally good or at least indifferent [and] the agent may not positively will the bad effect but may merely permit it."<sup>5</sup> So as Thomas explained in the question of self-defense, one may not will the bad effect, the death of the aggressor, but he may permit it if necessary. These first two conditions are general rules of morality; for a person may never perform a morally evil act nor could one ever positively will an evil effect even if the act would otherwise be lawful.<sup>6</sup>

The next two conditions, however, are a bit more complicated. The third one states that "the good effect must flow from the action at least as immediately (in the order of causality, though not necessarily in the order of time) as the bad effect." This means that the good sought must be caused directly by the act itself and not by the bad effect; for the agent may never use evil means to achieve a good end.<sup>7</sup> The fourth and final condition states that "the good effect must be sufficiently desirable

1 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II, q. 64, a. 6, in *Summa theologiae: Complete English Edition in Five Volumes*, vol. 4, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1981), 1464.

2 F. J. Connell, "Principle of Double Effect," in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, ed. The Catholic University of America et. Al. (Palatine: Jack Heraty & Associates, 1981), 1020.

3 *ST*, II, q. 64, a. 7, trans. English Dominican Province, 1465.

4 *ST*, II, q. 64, a. 7, trans. English Dominican Province, 1465.

5 Connell, "Principle of Double Effect," 1021.

6 Connell, "Principle of Double Effect," 1021.

7 Connell, "Principle of Double Effect," 1021.

to compensate for the allowing of the bad effect.”<sup>8</sup> This condition ensures that there is a level proportionality between the good achieved and the bad effect that also occurs as a result.<sup>9</sup>

Proportionality is of particular concern when applying the principle of double effect especially in military actions for “the principle of proportionality limits the amount of force one may employ to achieve a military objective.”<sup>10</sup> As the proverbial “shooting a fly with a bazooka” suggests, one may not employ excessive force, even in a just war<sup>11</sup>, to achieve a military objective; prudential judgment is always necessary. Nevertheless, the principle of double effect is applicable during a just war:

Thus, in waging a just war a nation may launch an air attack on an important military objective of the enemy even though a comparatively small number of noncombatants are killed. This evil effect can be compensated for by the great benefit gained through the destruction of the target.<sup>12</sup>

So the death of noncombatants is permissible so long as the conditions of the principle of double effect are met. The question that remains though is if these conditions were present in the act of bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

One of the main reasons that the United States has usually given as to why the atomic bomb was used against these cities is the claim that many more lives would have been lost if the bombs had not been used. The thought was that if the decision was made to invade Japan, huge losses would have amounted for both the Allies and the Japanese. Intel leading up to the bombing suggested that high casualties would have resulted from an invasion, much higher than those who would be killed by the bomb. Military historian Richard B. Frank notes:

The intercepts of Japanese Imperial Army and Navy messages disclosed without exception that Japan’s armed forces were determined to fight a final Armageddon battle in the homeland against an Allied invasion. The Japanese called this strategy Ketsu Go (Operation Decisive). It was founded on the premise that American morale was brittle and could be shattered by heavy losses in the initial invasion.<sup>13</sup>

These reasons are seemingly confirmed when

8 Connell, “Principle of Double Effect,” 1021.

9 Connell, “Principle of Double Effect,” 1021.

10 T.A. Cavanaugh, *Double-Effect Reasoning* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 181.

11 For an explanation of the “Just War” theory, see *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* Vol. 14.

12 Connell, “Principle of Double Effect,” 1022.

13 Richard B. Frank, “Why Truman Dropped the Bomb,” *The Weekly Standard* 10, no. 44 (2008): [www.weeklystandard.com](http://www.weeklystandard.com)

President Harry Truman explained in a letter to the editor of a newspaper the reason why he made the decision to use the bomb:

I knew what I was doing when I stopped the war that would have killed a half million youngsters on both sides if those bombs had not been dropped. I have no regrets and, under the same circumstances, I would do it again.<sup>14</sup>

In what was to be a choice between the lesser of two evils, the United States chose to use the bombs to end the war rather than an invasion as the loss of life, as terrible as it would be, would theoretically be far less.

In order to see if this act met the conditions of the principle of double effect, rendering it a moral action, the act, the intent, and the effects must be considered. The effect desired by this action is the end of the Second World War; a good end no doubt. The action in this case is to bomb a civilian target in order to terrorize and shock the Japanese into surrender. The intention of this act is to kill the citizens in the two Japanese cities. Unlike an instance where achieving a military objective may result in the unintended deaths of noncombatants, something that can be justified, the very intention in this case was the deaths of noncombatants. So the action itself and the intention behind the act were both morally impermissible.

Even if these first two conditions were not thus violated, the good effect of an act must proceed from the act immediately and not be caused by the bad effect of the action. In this case, the bad effect did bring about the good; the sudden death of so many civilians motivated the Japanese to surrender. The good was caused by the bad effect which means the third condition of the principle of double effect was also violated by using bad means to achieve a good end. This means that the act of bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki did not meet the conditions of the principle of double effect and were thus immoral and unjustifiable acts.

The nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that ended the Second World War were unjustified acts. The inherent immorality present in the deliberate targeting of civilians with such terrible weapons is the reason the Church has declared that “any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities of extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation.”<sup>15</sup> It is then the moral duty of all nations who possess such weapons to ensure that such a dreadful act never occurs again.

14 Harry Truman, “Letter on the Dropping of the Bomb,” (5 August 1963), at Nuclear Files: [www.nuclearfiles.org](http://www.nuclearfiles.org)

15 Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* (7 December 1965), §80, at The Holy See, [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).