Reason and National Goals

National resource allocation cannot be rational if it is not ethical.

Thomas Nagel

It is not self-evident that the subject of national goals is worth expending breath on, since the decisions that matter are really decisions about policies and programs, and too often the larger stated aims of these enterprises are purely rhetorical. Nevertheless, general ideas, whether expressed or not, appear to enter into the design of public policy in some way, and it might be worthwhile to attempt to make these ideas explicit and to discover whether or not they have any foundation.

A better understanding of these ideas is important for the policy-makers themselves, who have nothing to lose from a better understanding of what is rational and what is irrational in their motives, as well as for those who urge programs and expenditures on the government or who cooperate in their design—the scientific community, the academic community, and the aerospace industry being prime examples. If one appeals to motives that are inadequately grounded or understood, one may find oneself suddenly abandoned in midair by a fickle government or public.

The entire basis of major national resource allocations is rarely probed in any depth. It is as important for a middle-aged nation to consider what, fundamentally, it wishes to do with its national life as it is for a middle-aged man to decide what his life is all about. Yet, if the recent report of the National Goals Research Staff, *Toward Balanced Growth: Quantity with Quality* (*1*), is any indication, the reflections are not likely to be fundamental enough. That document assumes that we know more or less what we want and do not want, and treats the problem as one of settling conflicts among different aims and designing the pursuit of those aims to avoid undesirable side effects. It assumes that a general set of goals for the nation is defined by an increase in the availability of certain generally accepted goods—education, housing, health, transportation, scientific research, and technological advance—and a reduction of certain generally accepted evils—poverty, pollution, and overcrowding. All of these are to be balanced against suitable demands in the areas of national security and space exploration.

The report does not discuss these last two areas. The initial list of goods and evils contains only one controversial item—technological advance. The report is justified in rejecting the current wave of antitechnological hand-wringing, most of which comes from affluent, well-educated people who would cry bloody murder if they had to give up their dishwashers, air conditioners, dictaphones, nonstop jet flights, direct distance dialing, and so forth. Technological advance in this country has made it possible for many people to live a comfortable life without exploiting the remainder of the population. We need more and better technology to extend this possibility to more people and to improve the quality of such public services as transportation and waste disposal.

The report does stress the need, which everyone seems suddenly to have recognized, for assessing technological developments in advance—not just in relation to their stated aims, but also in relation to their unintended fallout and interaction with the total social and natural order. The problems of applying this ecological model are discussed with great penetration in *Technology: Processes of Assessment and Choice*, a report prepared by a panel of the National Academy of Sciences for the House Committee on Science and Astronautics (*2*). Although it may not be easy to accomplish, preservation of the environment and reduction of the untoward side effects of technological progress can themselves be made high-priority technological goals. The problem is how to bring this about by new decision procedures, incentives, and regulations. To quote from the National Academy of Sciences report (*2*, p. 55):

> The objective of heightened sensitivity in technology assessment should, whenever possible, be achieved by structuring the incentives of individual decision-makers so that they are induced to alter their cost-benefit calculations to encompass wider concerns than have heretofore been given consideration.

It is clear that the external diseconomies of many activities and enterprises do not automatically receive their proper weight in current decision-making procedures. It is also clear that a program cannot be designed solely with reference to one goal, but must refer to a variety of considerations; in fact, the conception of goals, which one tries to reach, might profitably be replaced by a body of considerations thought to be important. Moreover, it is desirable to devote a certain amount of effort to the development of capacities not designed for any particular goal at all, on the grounds that general scientific and technical advance will be useful in meeting needs yet unformulated or will provide unexpected new methods of achieving old aims.

Four Types of Desirability

All of these points are commonplace by now. The problems are not trivial, and they will arise in any complex, advanced society, even in the absence of doubt about its fundamental aims. The questions I am raising lie somewhat deeper. They concern the basis for regarding any given thing as a relevant consideration in the design of national policy.

It becomes important to adopt aims at a national level when something desirable cannot be achieved, or some-

The author is professor of philosophy at Princeton University, Princeton, N.J. 08540. This article is adapted from a paper presented at a working group on philosophy, science, and technology, held at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on 7 and 8 May 1971 and sponsored jointly by the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics and the Society for Philosophy and Public Affairs.

thing undesirable prevented, by individual or local action—when either the motivation or the resources are lacking. It is immediately possible, however, to distinguish four different ways in which such an end may be desirable. Something may be desirable because (i) it is in the interest of individual members of the society; (ii) it is in the interest of the nation, conceived as something more than its individual members; (iii) it is in the interest of people generally, whether in this society or elsewhere; or (iv) it is good in itself, rather than good *for* anyone or anything.

Often more than one of these categories is involved in a given aim, but it is instructive to distinguish them and discuss some of the problems peculiar to each, with an eye to drawing some conclusions about their relative importance in the deliberations of a modern society.

The first category is sometimes uneasily assumed to be the standard to which all government policies must be referred for justification. There exist elaborate defenses of the space program on the grounds of its contribution to the design of underwear, the development of new procedures for fitting artificial limbs, the dramatic increase in the number of churches in Huntsville, Alabama, and countless other benefits (*3*). Curiosities aside, however, there are various problems about how individual interests should be counted in the determination of public policy. I focus on three main questions. First, to what extent can individuals be relied on to know what their own interests are? This is the problem of paternalism. Second, to what extent is it permissible for the society to give special weight to the interests of some individuals rather than others? This is the problem of elitism. Third, how can the inevitably conflicting interests of millions of people be justly served by policies that do not serve all of them equally? This is the problem of distributive justice.

There are many other problems connected with individual interests—for example, whether the interests of future generations should be counted equally with those of the present population in determining present policy and whether there are certain interests, such as personal liberty, that must be accorded extraordinary weight or that should be regarded as rights. I shall concentrate, however, on the above three topics.

Paternalism

There are several areas in which government policies and regulations do not leave it up to individuals to decide what is best for them: one is medicine; another is sexual stimulation and gratification through publications, movies, prostitution, or nonstandard sexual practices; another is drugs; another is military security. In all of these cases the lawmakers, or the experts to whom they defer, establish policies or restrictions intended to benefit individuals in the society, whether the individuals see them as beneficial or not (*4*).

There is little dispute over the legitimacy of paternalism based on expertise in the medical sphere. The other three areas are highly controversial; many people feel that paternalism in these areas should be eliminated or reduced. In the case of military security, of course, there must be a national policy —it cannot be left up to the individual. But it is an area of strong paternalism nevertheless. At present, general public opinion plays an insignificant role, compared to expert military and technical opinion, in determining what is an increase in military security and what is a decrease, how much should be sacrificed to obtain a certain position of military dominance, what level of deterrent capability is worth a vast increase in civilian casualties if a war should take place, and so forth.

Admittedly, many people submit in a docile fashion to paternalism in military affairs, although fewer are docile about less important but more personal matters such as pornography and marijuana. Nevertheless, I believe that there is a substantial general wariness of paternalism in this society—a wariness that is justified by some of the excesses of paternalism, but that may hinder its extension to other areas in which it might be valuable. If paternalism could be properly based on unbiased expertise, it might well be extended to new areas as they are opened up by technological advance. I recognize, however, that the "if" is a big one. As it is, the Food and Drug Administration relies on the drug companies for testing, the Public Health Service's monitoring and evaluation of the effects of underground nuclear tests is funded by the Atomic Energy Commission, and so on (*2*, p. 61). Such facts do not encourage confidence in an extension of government paternalism to other areas of technology and consumer affairs. Such an extension may be necessary nonetheless, and it is important that people with the necessary expertise keep a sharp eye on how it is carried out.

It is important, whenever possible, to distinguish paternalism about values from paternalism about the methods by which certain valued aims may be achieved. In the case of medicine, for example, there is a presumed common aim of long life, good health, and physical comfort. Paternalism about methods of achieving this is unobjectionable and can be based on expertise. Paternalism about sexual conduct, on the other hand, is instituted precisely because certain basic values are not shared by everyone. It is therefore a far more fundamental interference with individual liberty than medical paternalism is. Still other cases cannot easily be classified as paternalism about ends or paternalism about means—for example, auto safety requirements, where the ends of safety, economy, and convenience are all assumed, and where the issue is how to trade them off against one another, in terms of specific requirements for design features.

Elitism

This society appears to depart from equal treatment in two directions: compensatory programs for the underprivileged and elitism. I do not discuss the first, partly because it is not accurate to describe it as counting the interests of the poor and uneducated more heavily than the interests of those who are better off; even if the interests of both groups are given equal weight, the underprivileged are automatically in a less favorable position for securing those interests. (Admittedly, it has been urged that damage done by the society to a group in the past should be compensated for by exceptional treatment in the present. But such an argument is not required to justify exceptional attention to the interests of blacks in the United States, for example.)

Elitism in national policies is very difficult to avoid, since those who are best endowed by nature and background and who have had the greatest advantages are in a stronger position to press their interests in determination of government policies than are the poor, the inarticulate, the ignorant, and the unimportant. Numbers by them-

selves do not overcome these disadvantages, and, although numbers combined with organization can do so, organization is not easily achieved without antecedent power of some kind.

Elitism today takes the form of major investments of resources in pursuits that interest the highly educated, technologically sophisticated top layer of American society. These pursuits include higher education itself, basic scientific research, and the space program, among others. Admittedly all of these things might be defended in other ways—for example, in terms of benefits that are not individual, but national or international. Just as often, however, an attempt is made to defend clearly elitist programs on more democratic grounds, and this just obscures the issue. The obscurity can go further if, for example, the underprivileged population is sold on an interest in higher education on the grounds that those of their number who are qualified will now have an opportunity to go to college. This is elitism with the wrinkles ironed out.

It may be that the advancement of particle physics or the landing of men on the moon are in themselves goods of great magnitude, but it is simply untrue that they serve the interests of the average janitor, dishwasher, farm laborer, or laundress. On the other hand, such projects do serve the interests, both intellectual and economic, of hosts of scientists, technicians, managers, and investors. It may be claimed that the elitism is a side effect of other aims, but this would be a distortion. The nation often identifies its interests predominantly with those of its most powerful and "advanced" groups, even if those groups are a minority and their interests conflict with those of the majority. When the most powerful groups also have access to modern communications, public opinion of a wider scope can usually be marshaled in support of an effectively elitist position.

It is important to recognize this tendency in order to decide whether it is justified and whether the justification could be appealed to publicly. Certain interests are common to everyone. Other interests appear only at certain levels of cultural and educational sophistication, and this naturally means that fewer people are involved. A central problem in government support for scholarship, cultural activities, and pure science is whether they are justifiable solely in terms of the benefits to those directly affected, or whether they must be defended in terms of eventual fallout and spin-off that will benefit everyone.

This is similar to the issue posed by John Stuart Mill's attempt to include distinctions of value between higher and lower pleasures in a utilitarian system (*5*). Put this way, it seems improbable that such differential allocation of national resources could be justified solely on the ground that some people's interests are more important than others. Rather, such a justification will succeed only if it appeals to considerations of another type—namely, that certain activities and achievements are good in themselves, or good for the society that produces them—quite apart from their benefit to individuals.

Distributive Justice

The third, and probably most difficult, problem under the heading of individual interests is that of just trade-offs. People are apt to use a phrase like "the general welfare" without reflecting that it expresses an extremely obscure and probably ill-defined concept. Any government policy helps some people and hurts others, or at the very least yields a distribution of benefits different from that of an alternative policy. Where resources are limited, is there some quantitative measure of individual benefits that government policy should seek to maximize, or should it seek to equalize benefits over the affected population, or should it follow a subtler principle of distribution?

These issues come into focus over the question of how the least privileged members of a society should fare under its policies. Is it legitimate to improve the situation of those who are already affluent, or at least comfortable, while letting the poor stay where they are? The same question arises about the relation between benefits to the upper-middle and lower-middle classes. A society with a large system of public higher education dispenses benefits to the former without giving anything analogous to the latter—to say nothing of helping to make life easier for the clever than for the not-so-clever.

The question is whether social justice should be a fundamental goal in the determination of public policy designed to serve individual interests, in order that equitable distribution, rather than the maximization of benefits, assumes primary importance. One view of a suitable measure for distributive justice is the Difference Principle formulated by John Rawls (*6*). It states that social and economic inequalities have to be justified in terms of their benefit to everyone, in particular to the least privileged groups in the society. This means not only that we cannot justify enslaving some individuals to make life easy for others, but also that we cannot justify massive government investment in higher education or scientific research unless it can be argued that this contributes, through its effects on the economy, technology, and political life, to the needs of poorly paid, unskilled manual laborers.

While this is not a straightforwardly egalitarian view, it does require that socially imposed inequalities be strictly justified, and it is likely to seem an extreme position to many. The elitism of this society—of most societies—is very deep and very natural. It is taken for granted that public services will be better in well-to-do than in poor areas of town, and the recent decision of the U.S. Court of Appeals, Fifth Circuit, which challenges this assumption, must have come as a shock to many communities (*7*).

Few things are more important for this country than a determination of the role to be played by a principle of distributive justice in shaping the massive interventions of the federal government in the country's social and economic life. What that principle should be—specifically, how egalitarian it should be—is an issue that already underlies most debates about social policy. There is much to be gained by bringing out the issue of principle in abstract form, for that is where the deep divisions are to be found.

National Interest

The idea of a national interest that is not merely a composite of antecedent, individual interests may strike some people as romantic. Perhaps it is, yet it plays a significant role in American politics and American policy formation. Prestige, dominance, not losing face, winning this or that technological race, being the most powerful country in the world—all of these goals are offered in justification of great sacrifices of life and wealth, often without any serious attempt to show how they serve the interests of individual citizens.

It may be argued that to be a citizen of the first country to land men on the moon is in itself a considerable benefit: if it justifies pride, it must be

worth something. But even if such feelings of pride and vicarious accomplishment are significant motivations, is it rational to accord them the weight they would need to have to warrant such massive allocation of resources? My own view is that national prestige and national pride are not worth the sacrifice of any real goods—that is, benefits for individual people or things good in themselves. There is little reason to believe that citizenship of the first country to land a man on the moon is a substantial good, although it may seem so to many people. It is evident that men will do irrationally wasteful and self-destructive things to avoid losing face. Politicians are not immune to this weakness, and nations as a whole are continually behaving like the heroes and villains of grade B westerns.

This creates a problem. One should avoid basing an appeal for support of a costly program on the grounds of national prestige or rarefied national interest if one is not genuinely convinced that these have objective importance. Yet the temptation to use arguments that will convince, even if they are not very good arguments, must sometimes be considerable. It can even lead to the construction of mission-oriented schemes that appeal to such interests, but whose real motive is to support more general research. Even more effective in producing legislative response than the appeal to national prestige is the appeal to national security, which has been widely employed by those seeking support for research and development.

The scientific and technological communities have reason to exercise collective restraint in these areas. It is very difficult, in appealing for funds, to disarm unilaterally while various other supplicants continue to use the full arsenal of arguments and persuasions, rational and irrational. If the scientific community were in some agreement as to the legitimate grounds for resource allocation and the relative importance of these grounds, they might be able to refer most appeals for government support to those grounds alone. But this would require confidence that all parties would conform, and confidence may be difficult to achieve.

A strong conception of national interest clashes with those strongly individualistic assumptions of traditional political theory that still dominate our thought in this area. If national interest and prestige are to be useful in determining national goals, they must be defined by reference to other values whose independent validity is clear. This means that the justification for pursuing a goal can never be prestige per se, but only the independent value of whatever it is that confers prestige. For example, if national security means reduced likelihood or likely extent of military destruction, then it cannot be identified with an edge in the number of nuclear warheads. Another possible example is that national decency or justice, or an unwillingness to do what is inhumane even if it would be convenient, might be counted among the legitimate objects of national pride. But these things are valuable in themselves, and worth pursuing; otherwise, they could form no legitimate grounds for pride. As a general principle, the claims of national interest must be *shown* to be worth the sacrifices that they may require, and this is most effectively done by relating them finally to individual interests.

Interests of Humanity

It is not easy to say how a country should weigh the interests of individuals other than its own nationals in making policy; nor is it easy to describe the connection between rhetoric and reality in the current practice of the United States. With a few exceptions like the Marshall Plan, the greatest expenditures of American resources in the service of humanity have taken the form of massive military action. Currently, our altruism involves the systematic devastation of several countries and the massacre of civilians in large numbers. Even the rhetoric is beginning to sound peculiar: the President's repeated defense of various enormities, on the ground that they are necessary to save American lives, invites the question, "How many Asian lives is an American life worth?" It may be wise not to insist on an answer.

If things are as grim as this, careful analysis of the exact weight to be given internationalist sentiments has a flavor of unreality. The sense of detachment, which permits most people to regard the suffering of those unlike them as insignificant, does not seem to have been overcome by the vividness of modern techniques of communication. It may be that we are a fundamentally cruel and bloodthirsty species and that Freud is right when he says, "It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness" (*8*).

However, to assume that man is fundamentally cruel and bloodthirsty would be simply to reinforce the existing tendencies in that direction. Those who object to the communal barbarism that now governs international relations must pay attention to the eradication of its roots in individual psychology. If those engaged in public debate fail to question the total primacy of American interests in policy formation and appeal only to patriotism of the narrowest sort, the public at large will continue to think about these issues in the same terms, and it will remain politically dangerous to appeal to other considerations. If chauvinism and xenophobia can be reduced in any degree by the quality of public argument about government programs, it would be unfortunate to miss the opportunity.

Some might say that moral considerations are meaningless outside of a legal system and the real problem is that we lack a system of international law. But the premise is in error for various reasons: (i) much of morality and the requirements of human decency are not covered by law, even within legally ordered societies; (ii) antecedent moral judgments have to enter into the formulation, the interpretation, and the application of law; and (iii) one of the many reasons international law has such difficulty finding acceptance is that people do not consider themselves part of a worldwide moral community, all of whose members share a basic human worth. The two systems, moral and legal, help to sustain one another. When a sense of moral community is lacking within a society, it creates serious problems for the viability of the legal system—as may be seen in the history of the American South, for example.

It is not clear what can overcome the weakness of most people's sense of an international moral community. But it is important that, when the occasion presents itself, consideration of the interests of humanity at large should be included in arguments about policy formation—and this should be done without apology and without further justification in terms of the national interest. What is required is no more than an extrapolation from the usual ethical demands on the interaction of individuals. It might seem that nothing would be easier, but evidently we must contend with powerful motives leading in a contrary direction.

Goods in Themselves

The final category of desirable ends to be considered here is the most obscure, but it plays a very important, often submerged role, and it may offer the most significant justification for departing from the allocation of resources to benefit individuals.

One of the justifications for elitism is that certain accomplishments and activities are intrinsically finer, rarer, higher than others and that a society should be committed to excellence, even if only a few of its members can enjoy the achievement. Such an argument would, for example, defend the large investment needed for continued intensive work in high-energy physics, not because it serves the interests of the scientists involved or because it increases national security, but because an understanding of the basic constitution of matter is a fine thing for human beings to achieve. If it is a fine thing absolutely, then it is to the credit of a nation to have furthered the achievement.

There are many investments of national resources that can only be defended adequately in these terms. The preservation of natural beauty, even at the cost of making large areas almost inaccessible to most people, is an example. Support of advanced or esoteric work in the arts, in literature, or in scholarship; the general promotion of high culture that claims the devotion of only a small audience; the preservation of significant architectural achievements of the past, despite their lack of current utility—all of these belong to the same category. They are warranted not because the people whom these things interest are more deserving of satisfaction than other people, but because the loss of the most beautiful possessions and advanced achievements of a society would not be worth the savings to be made by giving them up.

The space program has to be defended primarily on such grounds, but it is not an easy task. The extent to which a society can afford to devote its resources to the advancement of knowledge and human achievement for no further purpose depends on the extent to which that society is capable of satisfying much more basic needs and meeting the minimal conditions of social justice. A country with a serious famine problem would not be justified in diverting large sums for the support of symphony orchestras and astronomical observatories. If the space program cost no more than a string of orchestras or a national park or several observatories, it would be easy for this country to justify. But it costs a good deal more, and, even in the relative economic prosperity of the United States, there are serious deficiencies and inequities that make it difficult to regard the expenditure as other than a luxury.

To a great extent, societies are measured by the best that they produce. Everyone has a sense of history; it is conditioned by an awareness of past societies that is gained through their art, literature, science, and exploration, rather than through their attempts to achieve broad prosperity and social justice. However, this is a distorting perspective, and if we apply it to ourselves, grandiosity is in danger of overcoming decency and common sense in the formation of policy.

A natural anthropocentric conceit leads people to regard it as a great event that members of our species have reached the moon of this planet. But it is dangerous to allow oneself to be motivated too strongly by considerations of cosmic significance. Nothing we do in this out-of-the-way corner of an unremarkable galaxy would be likely to have cosmic significance, if there were such a thing. The human race, which is in terrible shape, manages to remain in love with itself, and this is nowhere more evident than in the peculiar floods of self-congratulation that accompany each step into space.

Summary

It has been argued that rationality, moral considerations, and a sense of proportion can be coherently applied in determining national policies. At present, the determination of policies, programs, and goals is often irrational, in that considerations under the four categories discussed—individual interests, national interests, the interests of humanity, and goods in themselves—receive more or less weight than they should.

Rationality is said to be increasingly under attack at the present time. It has never been terribly popular, but certainly the sources of suspicion are new, for those who distrust reason currently include numbers of college students. There is an explanation for this. Mistrust of rational analysis in political discourse is evoked by the impoverishment of the terms in which questions are often posed for rational solution and by the restrictive frame of reference, common in political discussion, which can make it appear that reason excludes morality and humanity. The appeal to cool, rational analysis is too often an excuse for refusing to listen to the clear warnings of conscience or common sense.

There is no opposition between reason and ethics, however. If rational principles of decision produce results that seem obviously wrong in a particular case, then there is reason to suspect that the principles failed to take some factor into account properly.

There are no general principles at hand for the evaluation of public policy; even if there were, their application would not be obvious. This discussion attempts only to describe relevant considerations and to pose questions about their relative weight. Those individuals actually engaged in public debate over policy and resource allocation have to do the work of broadening the range of factors accepted as relevant and of making the understanding of such factors deeper and more systematic. The scientific, technological, and academic communities are in a position to further this work by the character of their appeals for public funds, and it is to be hoped that their important position as special-interest groups will not hinder them from doing so.

References and Notes

1. National Goals Research Staff, *Toward Balanced Growth: Quantity with Quality* (Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1970).
2. National Academy of Sciences Panel on Technology Assessment, *Technology: Processes of Assessment and Choice*, report to the House of Representatives Committee on Science and Astronautics (Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1969). The report was written by the panel's executive secretary, Laurence H. Tribe, professor of law at Harvard University.
3. *For the Benefit of All Mankind: A Survey of the Practical Returns from Space Investment*, report of the House of Representatives Committee on Science and Astronautics (Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1970).
4. G. B. Dworkin discusses the subject thoroughly in *Morality and the Law*, R. Wasserstrom, Ed. (Wadsworth, Belmont, Calif., 1971), pp. 107–126.
5. J. S. Mill, *The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill —Ethical, Political, and Religious*, M. Cohen, Ed. (Modern Library, New York, 1961), chap. 2, "Utilitarianism," pp. 328–336.
6. J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1971), pp. 75–83.
7. Hawkins *v.* Town of Shaw, Mississippi, 437 Fed. Rep., 2nd ser. 1286 (1971). The court ruled that disparities between black and white sections of the town in the adequacy of street paving, street lights, sewers, drainage, water mains, fire hydrants, and traffic control signs constituted a violation of equal protection.
8. S. Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (Hogarth, London, 1963), vol. 21, chap. 5, "Civilization and its discontents," p. 114.