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Cassette Principles

It is time for scientific method to be applied to moral principles, lest society sink into sanctimonious chaos. Hardly a day passes in which an editorial writer, politician, or philosopher does not lament the absence of principles in our society. What they are talking about, of course, is the absence of principles in others, since each of us personally is confident that he or she is highly principled, quite willing to walk the plank, endure ostracism and, in extremis, miss a three-martini lunch in defense of our moral imperatives. Principles that appear in 72-point type, and loom so loudly in political arguments, have a cassette quality, being inserted for appropriate occasions and withdrawn on others.

In political debates, the principle resounds, "Our country should not be concerned with or meddle in the internal affairs of other countries." Some conservatives find this extraordinarily convincing when applied to group A (Chile, South Africa, and Iran under the late Shah) but highly inappropriate in relation to group B (Cuba, the Soviet Union, and China). Some liberals heartily agree with the principle of "hands off" in regard to group B but find it highly inapplicable to group A. The cassette principle allows the same individual to proclaim heatedly on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday that "we should not do business with dictators," referring to group A, and on Tuesdays and Thursdays that "dictatorships are sometimes necessary when people are too poor or too inexperienced to cope with democracy," referring to group B. At the other end of the political spectrum are those who agree with both statements but in reverse.

These principles are not only applied to foreign policy. "No one is above the law" is espoused emphatically by liberals in regard to Watergate and Irangate, and by conservatives in regard to California's former high court judge Rose Bird and nuclear power protestors, but by neither in regard to those with whom they are sympathetic. "Better to let a 100 guilty people go free than to convict one innocent person" is a slogan happily applied by some partisans to indigent criminals but not to insider traders on Wall Street, whereas others in the political spectrum argue that a prominent person "suffers enough" by being caught; prison is therefore superfluous for the privileged, but more scruffy types deserve prison.

The truth is probably that individuals make decisions by following a general philosophy of social progress. We tend to excuse "minor improprieties" in those whom we identify as good soldiers in a worthy cause and condemn the same peccadillos in those who oppose our broad general agenda. The danger of cassette principles is that widespread selective use tends not only to generate cynicism in regard to principles but also to obscure the pragmatic decisions needed to resolve a complex problem.

It is unlikely that cassette principles will disappear from the national or international scene. Nor does it seem likely that they are any more invoked or more ignored today than in previous eras. However, there is an easy scientific method to distinguish between cassette and true principles, the litmus test of increased generalization: if a principle is being applied to friends, extend it to foes (or vice versa) and see if it still fits. If it does not, then there is no principle at issue but only a debating point.

It is important to know when principles are inapplicable and to expose cassette principles as sophistries. If we cannot state our principles in clear language, each person can interpret the law in his or her own way. Foreign policy guided by principles that are not principles lurches from one precipice to another. Society would be far better off solving each case on the relevant issues, without pretense of principle, rather than trying to convince skeptics by invoking some highly adjustable principle, which will be withdrawn as soon as it becomes inconvenient. For example, dealing with dictators of powerful nations and even of small nations may be necessary temporarily even if undesirable in the long run. It is better to recognize this as an unpleasant reality rather than to invoke it in cassette fashion as a principle that merits allegiance.

To update Emerson, we could say, "A sanctimonious inconsistency creates hobgoblins in little minds." The test of a principle is whether it applies to friend and foe alike. If not, store it with the other cassettes to be used in political arguments but not to solve problems.—D. E. KOSHLAND, JR.