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Review Essay

Rethinking Morality in War

ERIC WESTER

Thirty years ago, when Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) framed the boundaries of the Cold War, Michael Walzer exclaimed in his landmark work *Just and Unjust Wars*: “Nuclear weapons explode the theory of just war.” For this reviewer, just as explosive was the assertion in America’s 2002 *National Security Strategy* (reinforced in 2006) that preemption is a long-standing facet of America’s security framework, a concept that has gained prominence in the published works of a number of contemporary ethicists. In the collection of five books reviewed here, thoughtful authors and editors add to that dialogue with their examination of a number of “hot-button” issues impacting our ethical environment.

Challenges in Ethics

What are some of the most critical challenges in today’s ethical environment? Do terrorism, genocide, and suicide bombers call for a major reevaluation and expansion of the study of ethics as that generated by MAD? How do we gain perspective related to theoretical ethics while actively prosecuting a global war against terrorism and religious extremists? Can we find correlations about ethics that will permit us to bridge the chasm between a western heritage and the eastern beliefs indigenous to the Levant? Is ethical thinking keeping pace with technology? Is it possible to reconfigure the Just War tradition to shoulder the ever-increasing moral responsibilities associated with ethics in warfare? Beyond the conceptual implication, the reports of continuing lapses of applied ethics in the conduct of modern warfare are sufficient cause for consternation.

Surveying the (Ethical) Battlefield

Numerous writers recognize the ethical challenges associated with today’s warfare. Most labor to apply the Just War tradition to these increasingly complex issues. Among the five books reviewed here, two focus precisely on such an approach, offering surveys aimed at students, scholars, and the general reader (in that order). These two works are *Rethinking the Just War Tradition*, edited by Michael Brough, John Lango, and Harry van der Linden, and *The Morality of War*, edited by David Kinsella and Craig Carr.

Philosophers Brough, Lango, and van der Linden examine a number of emerging issues relative to the Just War tradition including environmental justice,

order and justice *post bellum*, child soldiers, targeted assassination, noncombatant immunity, and the effects of dehumanization in *Rethinking the Just War Tradition*. Contributors have provided their analysis and philosophical reexamination of the Just War principles related to such matters. The editors acknowledge that the tradition is “normative” in most western countries chiefly because Just War is frequently presupposed in contemporary debates about the use of armed force. They rightly ask, however, if all 192 countries that are members of the United Nations should be bound by the principles associated with Just War. The editors cite the *Report of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change* released in December 2004 that traces the “five basic criteria of legitimacy,” criteria that very much resemble Just War theory, yet were drafted by nonwestern leaders. Readers seeking the correlation between military ethics and their professional lives will find this new addition to the State University of New York series on “Ethics and the Military Profession” most enlightening and instructive. It certainly belongs in the library of everyone concerned with a reexamination of the Just War tradition.

Political scientists Kinsella and Carr, academics at the Hatfield School of Government, Portland State University, examine an extremely wide array of topics in their latest work *The Morality of War*. The editors probe the history of *jus ad bellum*, *jus in bello*, and *jus post bellum*, analyzing the pivotal topics of preemption, terrorism, sanctions, and war crimes. They successfully achieve their announced goal of acquainting readers with the historical and contemporary rationale associated with a number of the issues regarding when, why, and how war can be justified. The editors introduce each chapter with a brief commentary highlighting the main issues and possible counter-points. This book is best-suited for those readers who are beginning their study of the Just War tradition. The book is ideally suited to serve as a core text for any survey course examining morality in warfare.

Do We Need Warriors?

Christopher Coker, professor of international relations at the London School of Economics, provides a penetrating analysis of the history, contributions, and contemporary cultural challenges for the modern warrior in *The Warrior Ethos: Military Culture and the War on Terror*. Coker declares, “What keeps war an ethical activity is the warrior ethos.” He contrasts the warrior ethos in the western tradition with the new class of soldier that is emerging; soldiers not representing a particular state, but those sponsored by non-state or sub-state entities including criminal cartels and terrorist groups. The author questions whether the traditional belief that warriors represent a line of defense against an increase in war’s inhumanity is still valid.

The suicide bomber is only the latest, and certainly not the last, incarnation of the foot soldier. His emergence does not absolve the western warrior of his honor and the responsibilities that are part of his code. Instead, they (these new enemies) make the code more central than ever.

Coker goes on to expand the scope of his analysis—examining the contrasts between various cultures. He postulates that in the Levant, attitudes toward the

city-state and citizenship are diametrically opposed to western (Aristotelian) concepts that western nations often attempt to impose on the rest of the world.

For Aristotle [and western thought], the city is the place of the political. Man is a political animal, the word derived from *polis* (the Greek city-state). For Rousseau the noble savage falls from grace and enters the city. There's no escaping the city if you're a western philosopher. For Ibn Khaldun, however, the Bedouin/nomad falls from grace when he enters the city. For he loses more than his integrity; he loses his fortitude, his ferocity, his passion. He makes a lousy soldier.

This book is a necessary read for anyone concerned with the role of today's military, and well worth the reader's investment. Coker's breadth of scholarship is impressive. Equally appreciated is the depth of the specific research and application given the role of warrior attributes in the modern world. The author presents a myriad of challenges to the traditional warrior concept and highlights a number of the emerging practices associated with training and "incentivizing" a military force.

A Revolution in Military Ethics

Coker's conviction that warriors serve as guardians of ethics could not be more overtly challenged than by the thoughts and philosophy expounded by Timothy Challans in *Awakening Warrior: Revolution in the Ethics of Warfare*. Challans, an instructor in ethics at the School of Advanced Military Studies at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, offers an enlightening treatise on moral philosophy. He appeals for a reversal in the direction that ethics education is taking in the military. The author traces ethical lapses beyond the responsibility of the individual and attacks on a broader context of a failed ethical philosophy. He asserts that most military members are blind to any real moral understanding.

The vast majority of military students I have personally taught in the classroom have many malformed moral beliefs. For example, most justify the exorbitant degree of collateral damage. They also justify harsh and coercive interrogation measures, even after understanding the manifestly illegal nature of such actions. They are more than willing to err on the side of excessive force or unnecessary harm over finding a balance between due risk and due care. In addition to believing in the basic tenet of military realism, they also believe in the doctrine of political realism. These beliefs are basic building blocks of their world view, which is contemptuous of substantive moral concerns. . . . The world view they hold impedes real moral understanding.

This last point speaks directly to the condition the author is seeking to remedy; that the current philosophy of ethics, including the Just War tradition, is the culprit. For Challans, America faces historic, systems, people, and leadership challenges. In an effort to diagnose the latter, he proposes a solution to this conundrum in his subtitle, *Revolution in the Ethics of Warfare*:

Since our leaders have always and perhaps will always continue to fail us morally,
and since the current conception leaves us to depend upon morally failed leaders,

perhaps one potential solution is to change the conception—we need a moral revolution to bring about moral progress in warfare.

Challens examines the institutional ethics associated with such notorious ethical failures as My Lai. “Very few recognize the culpability that the Army’s leaders and the military institution itself have concerning the incident. While most want to chastise [Lieutenant William] Calley for the My Lai incident, few are willing or want to face the possibility that the Army as an institution in large part created Calley and those like him.”

Challens has drawn on his years of military service and teaching at West Point to craft an argument challenging the methodology and pedagogy associated with the teaching of ethics throughout America’s military. The author’s call for reform is based on his belief that current methodologies and content rely too heavily on religious prejudices that negate the ability of the warrior to think independently about the moral issues associated with the conduct of war. This call for reformation combined with a demand for a new set of moral principles to govern the ethical behavior on the battlefield is certain to garner the attention and ire of many readers and military leaders.

Good People or Good Institutions

Anne-Marie Slaughter, in *The Idea That is America*, holds forth historic virtues that may help US national leaders and citizens alike regain a positive reputation in today’s international environment. Slaughter, Dean of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, advances seven values to lead America out of the environment of fear and mistrust in which she believes it currently finds itself. The author describes three essential attributes required for international rapprochement: “[F]or most Americans and most other people around the world, religious faith and humanist faith fit together . . . and [t]hese two faiths fit together best when both religion and Enlightenment humanism are strongly leavened by humility.” Slaughter asserts, “The Founders put little faith in virtue alone, even American virtue, to make a government work. On the contrary, their vision of American democracy was founded on a commitment to good institutions, not good people . . . and American democracy was founded on a commitment to good institutions, not good people.”

This work will be best appreciated by general readers seeking insight into the challenges associated with what Slaughter characterizes as entering a war “under false pretenses,” moral bankruptcy, loss of diplomatic clout, misguided practices of torture, and a self-inflicted national isolation caused by declaring you are “either with us or against us.” Her remedy centers on seven values: liberty, democracy, equality, justice, tolerance, humility, and faith. The author’s aim is to recalibrate and amend the nation’s foreign policy (and ethics) based upon the values presented. If the reader is looking for a formal evaluation of the ethical principles underpinning national policy this is not the book for you because it fails to address the technical aspects associated with ethical behavior.

The Next Step in Military Ethics

Publishing books based on rigorous research and quality presentation reinvigorates ethics education. Writers and editors who put forth such efforts not only further the professional education and enlightenment of their audiences, they raise expectations of what is on the horizon in the world of ethics. Both of the collections by Brough, Lango, and van der Linden and Kinsella and Carr inform and instill readers “to rethink the just war principles individually.”

In *Awakening Warrior*, Challans argues for moral education unshackled from Just War theories. He develops a thesis built on the belief that calls for fostering fully reflective political and military lives built on principles emphasizing the regulative idea of restraint. He proposes a model of moral autonomy employing philosophical ethics compatible with good order and discipline. It is well worth the reader’s investment in terms of wealth and time to reach Challans’s call for revolution—we must jettison the mistaken emphasis on moral authority and remove the camouflage of the warrior ethos.

Anne-Marie Slaughter approaches the issues associated with a change in ethical theory from a virtues ethic viewpoint or philosophy, rhetorically asking:

What role should America play in the world? We should stand for our values, the values that this country was created to achieve and that define us as a nation. Standing for these values is both an end and a means. It reflects who we are as a people; it also serves our long-term national interests.

That answer may seem obvious, but many in my profession—scholars and practitioners of foreign policy—would argue instead that American political and economic interests often conflict with our values, and when they do, we should go with our interests.

Finally, Coker offers readers insight regarding the true character of warriors. The author leaves his audience with an understanding that the warrior ethos serves as much more than just an instrumental aspect of ethical conduct in war. Coker conveys the unique role that men and women in uniform have assumed in today’s society and carry into the public sector. All of these works will provide soldiers and civilians alike with new ethical perspectives and philosophies associated with the “way ahead” in their understanding and practice of ethical behavior.

More awareness and analysis of institutions and ethics are exactly the emphases needed for developing unit and senior leaders. Renewed professionalism takes ethics beyond descriptive and prescriptive information to meaningful reflection and analysis at meta-ethical and normative levels. Quickened professional awareness by military leaders moves ethics beyond cognition to courage and action. A professional community holds its members accountable for discretionary judgments in application of the military art. The initiatives at West Point in forging leaders of character and competence applying the ethical development model of James Rest are recommended in addition to these five tomes.

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