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War: Its Morality and Significance

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Abstract

This brief paper is a general treatment of war – its morality and its political and social effects. Accordingly, we discuss primarily those armed interactions between nations, or, in “civil” wars, those aimed at securing the reins of government. These must, we contend, be inherently immoral on one side – the one which “starts” the war in question – and inherently moral on the other, who after all are defending their lives against the first. To say this requires a moral theory, which we briefly develop. It proceeds on Hobbesian-contractarian lines: if mankind occupies a “state of nature,” then we will all be worse off than if we join with each other in adopting the restrictions of morality – fundamentally, and primarily, of nonviolence, of living at peace with each other. This raises a question about the very rationality of war, to be sure. And yet, war we have, in considerable and unfortunate abundance. How can this be? Some tentative answers are suggested.

Keywords: war; morals; pacifism; war pacifism; Hobbes; social contract

I. War

a. Peace in some places in my time...

I grew up far from war or its threat. This was largely a matter of luck. I was born in the U.S. at the height of the Great Depression (1936). I was much too young to participate in WWII, and in the tiny town I grew up in, the war made little dent. My family moved to a larger town when I was 11 years old, still too young to be, e.g., drafted in the Korean War. (My oldest broth-

er joined the National Guard – I think to escape the draft – and it worked. He did spend one year at a military camp – but he wasn’t shipped overseas.) Later I won a “pre-induction” scholarship (to the University of Chicago), which probably made me unlikely to be drafted. Then I went to graduate school, and as such was ineligible for the draft. By the time I would have been eligible because that exemption was lifted, I was married, and that again made me ineligible. Then we had a child – ineligible once again. And then I was too old, as well as moving to Canada where I have been ever since.

So, in all of my life, I have been far removed from involvement in war. But that didn’t prevent an interest in it – perhaps just the reverse. Contact with students led me to write my first paper on Pacifism,¹ in which I maintained the rather heady-sounding view that that theory was essentially incoherent. That paper attracted more attention, I think, than any of the others I’ve published (two hundred or so – I lost count.) I returned to the subject often in my academic career, the last being in 2013 composed which, for a conference on the subject of Pacifism, I presented a more refined view.² Why so pacific a person and so protected a life should have been accompanied by a great interest in war – I suppose I own a hundred books on various aspects of the subject, especially histories of the second World War – is intriguing. Why, indeed? Well, whatever the personal situation may be, no one can doubt that war is *important* – using up an enormous amount of money and a fair bit of the world’s manpower. Nothing else, really is needed by way of justification for yet another book on the subject. I hope that what follows says something novel enough to be food for thought.

b. War – Definitions

I start with a definition of ‘war’ for purposes of this paper. I think it captures the most nearly standard use of the term. In general: Wars are Group Violent Conflicts.

Perhaps we should add: between *organized* groups. Or is it just that when fracasess are carried by mobs, their political influence is too small for them to deserve more attention?

Also, that the violence in question can be, and typically often is, lethal. Its potential lethality, of course, is especially what gets makers of war into (moral) trouble – or, more precisely, it is what would raise in most people’s minds questions about the morality of war.

A question we must ask, regarding any particular war, regards its purpose – what is the fracas about? After all, some possible purposes might be condemned while others might be approved, even applauded.

¹ Jan Narveson, “Pacifism: A Philosophical Analysis,” *Ethics* 75, no. 4 (1965): 259-271.

² Jan Narveson, “Pacifism – Fifty Years Later,” *Philosophia* 41 (2013): 925-943.

And structure: Does each army (as we'll call them), have a leadership structure? Does it terminate at a government or would-be government?

Wars are typically political – indeed, if a conflict wasn't so, would we call it a war? That is to say, one of the “sides” wishes to seize the reins of government, and the other to prevent the first from doing so. (Clausewitz famously said, “War is politics carried on by other means.”) Even if some are not, we are at any rate especially interested in the ones that are political – are intended to support a given proposed set of persons as *the* government, and are organized toward that end, and equipped, minimally, with potentially lethal weaponry in support of their efforts.

So, war has a technological aspect: what sort of armaments do the different armies command? In cases where one “side” is overwhelmingly superior, it will usually be because of the capability of its armaments. The sheer numbers of fighters can be a factor too, but unless – once again – the superiority of numbers is overwhelming, better training and better armaments will usually be the relevant factors.

Plus? We would next get to psychological factors: how strongly motivated are the two sides? How intensely do they believe in what they are fighting for? Given at least comparable military technology, such factors can make the difference.

c. War – Rights and wrongs

This sets the stage for our philosophical/moral questions. Almost everyone takes it that killing people is wrong.³ In wars, the soldiers involved attempt to kill each other, often successfully. That surely makes it sound immoral. Is war, then, always and inherently wrong?

i. Pacifism⁴

One view is that the answer is: *yes*. The view that all violence, whosever “side” it's on behalf of, is wrong, is called *pacifism* (with many kinks by supporters and critics). Pacifists, in other words, reject the “usual” an-

³ That this view is hardly new is suggested by this passage from Cicero: “The only excuse, therefore, for going to war is that we may live in peace unharmed [....].” From Cicero's “On Duties,” excerpted in Larry May, Eric Rovie, and Steve Viner, *The Morality of War: Classical and Contemporary Readings* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall/Pearson, 2006).

⁴ Cf. my “Pacifism: A Philosophical Analysis,” also, Jan Narveson, “Is Pacifism Consistent?” *Ethics* 78, no. 2 (1968): 148-150; Jan Narveson, *Moral Matters* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1999), especially ch. 5: “War” – *pacifism* in particular is briefly treated on pages 115-122. See also Jan Narveson, “Terrorism and Pacifism: Why We Should Condemn Both,” *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (2003): 157-172, and Jan Narveson, “Pacifism: Does It Make Moral Sense?” in *The Routledge Handbook of Pacifism and Nonviolence*, ed. Andrew Fiala, 191-198 (New York: Routledge, 2017).

swer cited above: self-defence. That especially is what makes *pacifism* such a surprising – not to say, uncomfortable – view.

Pacifism is a view typically found in the young and, as we may say, untutored. Why so? Most of us are not pacifists. Why not?

In about half of the cases in wartime, there is a good answer, we think: these guys (the other “side”) are trying to kill us! They do this in their effort to “take” our country, to commandeer the choices of our citizenry. Morality says (we think): Hey, you can’t do that!

ii. What more do we need?

I say “about half”: one of the “sides” typically starts the war. Those they attack, then, are (at least) trying to defend themselves – and, characteristically, they also think of themselves as defending their friends, families, and communities, on up to their nations. And they are at least *prima facie* correct in thinking so. (As it works out, of course, the soldiers on the other side find themselves in the same position! *They* didn’t start the war, after all, and yet the soldiers on the other side are trying to shoot *them* too!)⁵

iii. Why do people fight wars?

But why are we being attacked? What, if anything, did we do to “deserve this?” As an essentially perfect example (in my and a lot of people’s view), think of the Ukrainians, who were suddenly attacked by Mr. Putin’s (Russian) armies. We – most of us (in the West? Well, along with many Russians, at least, and with perhaps most of the world’s people) – consider that Putin’s armies attacked an innocent populace, people who had done nothing to deserve this – and as such, is just wrong. (The substantial military support that the Ukrainians are getting from the NATO countries perhaps testifies to the widespreadness of this view.)

But now, of course, the question arises: what constitutes a good reason for warfare? Or even a “reason” at all?

(1) One category that no doubt often applied in the distant past is recognizable and, certainly, discussable: where the attackers claim that they will starve if they don’t acquire the food resources of the attacked. But whatever may have been the case long ago, and however plausible such disparities may have been as justifications for wars, they simply don’t occur anymore. No sizeable group runs a danger of starvation nowadays.

⁵ May et al. point out, in their Introduction to the anthology previously noted (p. xii) that both sides might think they are in the right – and then what?

What, none? I'll simply assert: No – None! Those who think otherwise are likely thinking of what most of us, including the author, would regard as *government failure*, or perhaps as social failure, but not resource failure. For whatever reason, governments of countries that could supply the deficiencies aren't in fact doing so. Were it not for them, starvation, nowadays, would never be a problem.

Since it's never true for the time being that any nation can plausibly claim to be in that kind of need from that kind of potential supplier, then what remains as plausible motivations for war – if anything?

Of course, there may be other resources. Goodness knows, the earth's resources are not evenly distributed around the world. There are several points to make about this. For one thing, it is not clear that resources are worth fighting over. Some of the world's wealthy countries have no natural resources, to speak of – the Netherlands, for example. (The Netherlands does have quite a lot of farmland; but then again, much of this was raised from below sea level by that industrious people. For the rest, it's industry, ingenuity, and especially the *free market* that enable the Dutch to be so prosperous.) And for another, let's remember that Nature does not owe us anything in particular, and therefore does not owe an equal share of the world's resources. (Besides which, most of those "resources" are considerably or entirely man-made – that's the secret behind the Netherlands' success. And do the hard-working creators of all those resources really owe each of us, equally, a share of them? Most of us think not, as do I.)

(2) At this point Hitler and many more will claim that the group attacked is in some way *errant*: the people such tyrants attack were once, or even still are, under the skin as it were, "members" of the nation doing the attacking. And so, ...well, *so what?* – we must ask. Since when do we have the right to threaten to kill people whom we claim to be "ours," just because they don't want to stay with us? Here, think of China and Taiwan. Quite apart from the shakiness of the empirical premises – such as that way back when, those people were all Chinese (or something like that) – the Chinese simply have no business reclaiming by force their formerly close relatives. *Period*. Case closed! (Yes, the Chinese mainland government has talked many of the world's countries, including the U.S., into agreeing that Taiwan is a "part of" mainland China. But that doesn't keep them from treating Taiwan as if it were an independent country, and indeed, at least in the case of the U.S., of proposing to help defend Taiwan if the mainland government tries to try to take it by military force.) The same applies to the still

shoddier case made out by Mr. Putin re the Ukrainians.⁶ One is reminded, if perhaps at some distance, of Mr. Hitler's efforts in *Mein Kampf*.⁷

II. Moral theory and war

I speak here in the language, as it were, of morals on the street.⁸ And I do think there would be widespread acceptance of the moral pronouncements in the preceding. Still, though, as a *philosopher* in reasonably good standing, I should surely have some sort of “classier” case, should I not? Indeed, I should (as not all of my colleagues would agree) – especially since there are evidently some who would differ, insisting, say, that Mr. Putin and Mr. Xi, and many-many others, have the *right* to attack their various chosen enemies. I think this such claims are incredible, and argue for that conclusion below.

So, I agree that we need a more fundamental case if we are to condemn aggressive makers of war for their proposed or actual aggressions. Here, then, it is. (I start with the usual rejections of some predecessors, including my own previous view.)

a. Utilitarianism

To start with Utilitarianism – I was once a utilitarian, in my younger days.⁹ Utilitarianism has, after all, much to be said for it. It affirms one simple principle – “Maximize utility!” – as the supreme fundamental idea of morals. And for impartiality, you can't beat it! (In principle, anyway...) Each is to count for one, none for more than one, and in short, a unit of A's utility is to have the same value as a unit of B's.

But that's the trouble: Utilitarianism is *too* impartial. We humans, though, are just not very impartial: we elevate our children, our spouses, our friends, often ourselves, above people in general. Not that there's anything wrong with “people in general,” of course. Indeed, morality may even be regarded as the theory of how to treat people “in general.” Nevertheless, your ordinary modern parents, if given a choice between contributing a hundred of their hard-earned dollars to some agency such as Oxfam and buying their much-loved child a new

⁶ See, for example, the recent book by Mikhail Zygar, *War and Punishment: Putin, Zelensky, and the Path to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine* (New York: Scribner, 2023).

⁷ Does anyone really think that comparing Putin with Hitler makes Hitler look better?

⁸ The characterization by Gaus is recommended and is more or less the same as that adopted here. See Gerald Gaus, *The Order of Public Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2-14.

⁹ Jan Narveson, *Morality and Utility* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967).

Nintendo game (or whatever the current example of choice may be) would not hesitate to choose the latter.

And why, after all, should we? There is, I think, a good answer to that, which will shortly be forthcoming. Here the point is that, whatever the right answer may be, it is evidently not the utilitarian one.

b. Theories of character

Turn next to the theories of character with which the pages of moral treatises abound – such as Aristotle’s, to take a check-rated such theory.¹⁰ But the question I would ask Aristotle is the same I would put to any such theory: are we really to say that what makes killing wrong is that *good people just don’t do that sort of thing*? Or is it not rather that what *makes* good people good is that they accept and (do their best to) conform to moral requirements, among which perhaps the foremost is – not to kill (innocent) people?

I expect that the question will be seen as answering itself. It doesn’t, to be sure. We’ll ere long come, though, to what does, at least so far as I and several contemporary philosophers can see.¹¹

c. Deontic theories

There are many theories, or at least sets of terminology, classified as “deontic” by, as I am tempted to say, theorists who should know better. (Kant is regarded as your archetypical deontologist. Happily, I think that can be refuted... but let’s not get into Kantian exegesis here...) In truth, the term ‘deontic’ if intended to depict either a sort of basic theory or a sort of principle or judgment, is a sad mistake. For of all such theories, if earnestly put forward as theories, we can ask: Why on earth should we do that? After all, the point of such theories is to be “stoppers”: you aren’t supposed to be able to “go beyond” such a consideration – such as the consideration that if we do X, we would be killing someone.¹² ‘X’ being ‘murder,’ this would be true by definition,

¹⁰ Aristotle, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House/Modern Library, 2001).

¹¹ Examples are David Gauthier, author of *Morals by Agreement* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), among others; and *The Order of Public Reason*, by Gerald Gaus. All Libertarians, of course, espouse such views, but they differ among themselves as to the foundations of their view. See, for example, the book *Arguments for Liberty*, eds. Aaron Ross Powell and Grant Babcock (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 2016), with nine chapters by people who appear, at least, to differ among themselves.

¹² My views about Ethics are most fully found in my book, *This is Ethical Theory* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2010).

which proves nothing. But if we do – then what? Deontology has then, professionally as it were, run out of gas.

d. Hobbes

If, more modestly, we just press on and ask: Why? – even though we're not supposed to – the feeling will grow that, Dammit!, the theorist owes us an answer – and a decent answer. And authors there be who got very close. Perhaps my favourite such is Hobbes, who asks us, famously, how things would be in the complete absence of morality – human nature being what it is. And his very famous answer is: Awful! "... and the life of Man, Solitary, Mean, Nasty, Brutish, and Short."¹³

An exaggeration? Well, maybe – but maybe not. To get back for a moment to our subject, War, think of the lives of men in the trenches in World War I. Their awful situations are, surely, due to the lack of restraint – especially in the way of killing people – shown by their enemies (of either side). Impartially considered, Rational Man says about this: Aach!

At any rate, Hobbes' general argument is that we humans *need* morality. It's not enough that people be Nice Guys – because they frequently aren't, besides which many of those in the opposite trenches were nice enough, after all – y'know?¹⁴ So, what is needed is an honest-to-goodness moral theory – an identification of the factors which create the need for morals. Now, to be sure, we have persons, such as Mr. Xi (current autocrat of China), who seem to have different ideas about these matters. Or his predecessor Mao, or a snag of theorists such as Nietzsche – who may seem, at first sight, to have different views of the "Human Good," so to say. (Or do they? But once again, we won't get into that.)

Where, then, do we begin? With Man as he or she is – anywhere and at any time, surely. And how is that? Note well: this is not the theory of some tribe's behaviour. It is intended to be the theory of how *everybody should behave in relation to everybody else* – including total strangers. All more particular tribal ethics are, we hold, to conform to this supremely general rule or principle.

Such Hobbes held – and I think he's right – to be his First Law of Nature¹⁵: "to Seek peace and follow it" and only if we can't get it do

¹³ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), ch. XIII.

¹⁴ Hobbes. For an interesting modern discussion, see Lou Marinoff, *On Human Conflict* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2019), 115-160.

¹⁵ Hobbes, ch. XIV.

we resort – and are entitled to use – “all the helps and advantages of war...” Why, then, is Hobbes right, as I think he is?

e. The contractarian theory¹⁶

We are possessed of many physical needs, for one thing. And social ones, for another. However, as to specifics, we differ: my Mom was not your Mom – they’re very different people! And, as the saying goes, “one man’s meat is another man’s poison.” True enough. True also, though, is that however we may differ, we each can be deprived of *whatever we do have...* ending with life itself.

Different, therefore, doesn’t keep us from finding a common point for what we have reason to condemn on the part of our fellows, or ourselves for that matter. If, as we might say, we had to choose, we’d choose that everyone *at least leave everyone else alone*. (We might, of course, like it still more if they’d treat us even better. But we then run the danger of asking too much.)

Well – *do* we “have to choose?” In a sense, yes. That is – if our only way to get out of this “state of nature” in which we all have the freedom to do exactly as we please is to join with our fellows in renouncing it then that is what, as rational beings, we should do.

III. Problems

Simple story? Well, complexities aside, yes. (One such should be cleared up right away: Hobbes need not assume, and in fact is not assuming, that we are all nasty underneath the skin. He only needs to hold that we would all be rationally worried about whatever people there are who *are* like that. Yet this first “Law of Nature,” the Law of Non-Harm, as we might call it, is enormously difficult in its detailed requirements.¹⁷ For what we want is for many of us to change our psychologies. And that’s not easy to do. Yet it must be done, if we are all to have what we want – peace.

Or is it what we all want? In insisting that the answer should be yes, let’s admit there are many – such as your typical gangster – who pay only lip service to this First Law of Nature. Mind you, if we knew that this individual walking in apparent innocence down the street was in fact a dangerous gangster, Hobbes’ Law would apparently allow us

¹⁶ See several of my papers, such as: “Social Contract: The Only Game in Town,” *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review* 55, no. 4 (2016): 695-711.

¹⁷ That is what the proposed book, of which this is a sort of advanced summary, will be considerably devoted to.

to kill him on the spot. In almost every town and country now, there is an easier answer: refer him to the Police.

But of course, we don't know just who among us is one of those (gangsters), and lest any of us be falsely accused, we try to set up not only police forces but also legal systems with lawyers, judges and jails and the like.

And, alas, that in general is why we have wars. Now, it is my view – and I hope everyone's – that when it comes to initiating the rule of violence that is war, at least one party is *necessarily and always in the wrong*, the other party being, relatively at least, a victim.

If this is so, we need to band together, we who are relatively strong, and attempt to induce this guilty party to back off, or if necessary, band together and make hopefully successful war on that party. It often doesn't work, alas – yet if the forces assembled to support the victims are strong enough, that aggressor will indeed back down, especially because he knows he'd lose if a war were started. The example of Ukraine again comes to mind. Notoriously, Mr. Putin is anxious that Ukraine not become a member of NATO, whose cooperating forces would overwhelm the Russian army. We (liberals? But, we hope, more – indeed, every thoughtful person) can hope that there will be enough support for the Ukrainian force to “win” as Ukraine's premiere, Mr. Zelensky, would like.

In recent times, many have taken up the position of “war pacifism,” by holding that the idea is only to confine one's resistance, against politically organized enemies, to peaceful means. In my previous writings about *pacifism* as a general theory, I do not claim to have refuted this theory, which obviously requires that the intended enemies are capable of being swayed by such tactics. And are they? Well, not necessarily, one surely must say. Mr. Gandhi was fortunate to have as his “enemy” Great Britain instead of Hitler's Germany. The chances that the Nazis would be impressed by peaceable tactics seem, to many of us, pretty well zero. But still, it is an empirical matter, and we don't want to make a general moral theory rest on such premises.

There is also the question to what extent the advent on the scene, in 1945, of nuclear weapons fundamentally complicates everything. Certainly the West, which is well supplied with such things, has hesitated to use them ever again, as for examples against North Korea, the Russians or the Chinese. The theory of “MAD” (Mutually Assured Destruction), has thus far apparently worked, that being no big surprise. After all, if one's own destruction can be plausibly ‘assured’ by both parties, that would seem to be an ultimate consideration.

And yet, the known possession of such weapons has had the interesting result of making much lesser wars frequent occurrences in today's globe. Is there a solution to that? That has become one of today's fundamental questions. This article does not purport to offer solutions to it. Can we hope one arises? Who knows – at least, at present?

Here's an example of contemporary reasoning about war, by a contemporary American group, the example being the situation of Taiwan vis-a-vis the U.S., China, and various other global actors:

The Task Force assesses that although China is developing the military capabilities it would need to annex Taiwan and is determined to subjugate the island, it has not yet decided to pursue a nonpeaceful resolution and deterrence remains possible. Although war is not inevitable, unless the United States moves with urgency to bolster deterrence and shape Chinese leader Xi Jinping's decision-making calculus to raise the costs of aggressive action against Taiwan, the odds of a conflict will increase.¹⁸

I have no intention of supplying helpful input to discussions such as that – alas! But I hope that having, as I suppose, provided much support for the view that, in this case, the (Communist) “Republic” of China's actions would be thoroughly immoral is perhaps useful to some.

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¹⁸ Council on Foreign Relations, *Report no. 81*: “U.S.-Taiwan Relations in a New Era Responding to a More Assertive China,” <https://www.cfr.org/task-force-report/us-taiwan-Relations-in-a-new-era>.

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