Title: The Ethics of War: Navigating Moral Dilemmas and Absolutism

Introduction: War and Moral Conflict

War places human beings in extreme situations where the usual boundaries of morality are tested and often crossed. Among the most troubling ethical dilemmas are those where one must commit a morally questionable act to prevent a greater evil. Examples include torturing a suspect to obtain critical information or dropping bombs on civilians to hasten the end of a war. Philosopher Thomas Nagel expresses pessimism about whether such dilemmas can ever be truly resolved. This paper argues that while absolutist moral frameworks provide an important ethical compass, rigidly sticking to them in all circumstances can be impractical and even harmful. Instead, a nuanced approach that considers both moral principles and outcomes, while acknowledging moral cost, is necessary in dealing with war-time dilemmas.

Absolutism and Deontological Ethics

Absolutist ethics, particularly those based on deontological theories like Kantianism, maintain that certain actions are inherently wrong, regardless of consequences. From this perspective, acts like torture or intentionally killing civilians are morally impermissible under any circumstances. The strength of this view lies in its clarity and moral integrity. In the specific sense that it ensures that certain lines are never crossed. For example, Kant argues that human beings must always be treated as ends in themselves, never merely as means to an end (Kranak). From this standpoint, using someone– even as a terrorist— as a tool to prevent a larger tragedy violates their inherent integrity. It offers a strong stance against the slippery slope of moral compromise. For example, if torture is ever allowed, it may become easier to justify in less extreme cases, eventually eroding moral standards.

This view preserves the moral integrity of those making decisions in war and sets a high ethical standpoint. During the Vietnam War, for instance, the My Lai massacre– where US soldiers killed hundreds of unarmed Vietnamese civilians was not only a violation of international law but a breach of fundamental moral principles. Absolutist ethics clearly label such acts as morally impermissible, regardless of the war's objectives. However, while this ethical clarity is admirable in theory, applying such rigidity to real-life war contexts may cause more harm than good. Soldiers may find themselves paralyzed by inaction, unable to respond effectively in situations that demand urgent decisions. This tension between moral theory and practical necessity underscores the need for ethical frameworks that are both principled and flexible.

Therefore, critics of deontological absolutism point out that it can result in morally counterintuitive outcomes. For example, if following a moral rule leads to massive loss of life, is it still the right thing to do? This question forces us to confront the tension between rigid moral principles and the consequences of action and inaction in wartime. While absolutism insists on maintaining moral purity, it may fail to prevent catastrophic harm, raising questions about its sufficiency in a world full of moral trade-offs.

Challenging Absolutism: The Problem of Exceptional Cases

However, war often presents scenarios where rigid adherence to absolutes may lead to greater harm. Consider the "ticking time bomb" scenario. A scenario where authorities capture a terrorist who knows the location of a bomb that will kill thousands. Is it not morally justified to use torture to extract that information? An absolutist would say no and forbid torture even in this

case, because it violates an unbreakable moral rule. However, from the perspectives of many, this response can feel emotionally and morally unsatisfying when lives are at stake.

Philosophers such as Michael Walzer have explored this dilemma through the concept of "dirty hands"(Walzer). Walzer argues that sometimes political leaders must do morally wrong things to fulfill their responsibilities (Walzer). A leader may have to order a morally repugnant action, not because it is correct, but because the circumstances demand it. This view does not deny that the act is wrong, but acknowledges the wrong and suggests that leaders should still feel the moral burden of their choice. This enriches the conversation by introducing a middle ground where moral guilt coexists with moral necessity.

Furthermore, it is essential to note that this thought experiment is not just theoretical. After the 9/11 attacks, the US government authorized "enhanced interrogation techniques" on detainees suspected of terrorism, citing national security concerns. These actions, later were widely criticized as torture. Hence raising the question, can violating one person's rights ever be justified to save many others? The ticking bomb scenario introduces the need to weigh harms, recognize urgency, and evaluate proportionality.

Consequentialism and Utilitarian Reasoning

This dilemma pushes the debate toward a more consequentialist perspective, where outcomes hold significant ethical weight. It challenges the moral intuition that right and wrong can be entirely separated from consequences and encourages us to consider context as morally relevant. Hence, are there moments when the consequences are so extreme that they justify breaking otherwise absolute moral rules? This is where the ethical perspective of consequentialism becomes relevant. Consequentialist theories, especially utilitarianism, judge

actions based on the results they produce. In wartime, this approach is often used to justify morally troubling decisions, such as sacrificing some to many. For instance, the USA's decision to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki killed hundreds of thousands but arguably hastened the end of World War II, potentially saving millions of lives.

Winston Churchhill, reflecting on the Allied bombing campaign against German cities, accepted that civilian casualties were tragic but necessary to defeat a greater evil, Nazism. In this case, the ethical defense was based not on the act itself but on its anticipated outcomes. Similarly, drone strikes today aim to eliminate high-value targets in terrorist networks. When a drone strike kills a target but also results in civilian deaths– often labeled “collateral damage”- the justification hinges on the presumed benefit of the prevention of future attacks. One notorious example occurred in Afghanistan in 2010, when a drone strike targeting insurgents mistakenly killed a group of civilians, including children. Although the mission was intended to eliminate a threat, the consequences sparked international outrage. Therefore, commanders and policymakers must consider whether the benefit of removing a target outweighs the potential moral and strategic costs of civilian deaths. These situations reflect the necessity of moral judgment in fast-paced, high-risk environments and emphasize the importance of rules of engagement that prioritize civilian protection.

However, consequentialism is not without flaws. Critics argue that it can be used to justify nearly any action, including atrocities, as long as the intended result is positive. The danger of this reasoning is evident in historical abuses. For instance, Stalin’s purges were defended as necessary for the success of the Soviet state. Thus, while consequences matter, they cannot be the sole measure of morality.

Nagel's Moral Realism and Tragic Choices

Thomas Nagel's reflection on war and ethics adds another layer to this conversation. In his essay "War and Massacre", he acknowledges the inescapability of moral conflict in wartime decisions (Nagel). He believes that war forces people into tragic situations where all choices involve moral wrongdoing (Nagel). According to him, there is often no truly right answer– only choices between competing wrongs (Nagel). This view highlights the tragic dimension of war ethics. Even if torture or bombing is justified on consequential grounds, it does not mean these actions are morally clean. They carry moral residue and a lingering sense of wrongdoing. We may accept these actions as necessary evils of tragic necessities, but we cannot celebrate them.

Nagel therefore urges us to recognize that war presents moral agents with impossible choices. Nagel distinguishes between two moral viewpoints, the agent-relative and the agent-neutral (Nagel). Deontology tends to align with the former, emphasizing what individuals may or may not do based on their duties. Consequentialism is aligned with the latter, focusing on maximizing overall good from a detached perspective. Nagel criticizes approaches that ignore this duality, arguing that any ethical theory that attempts to dissolve the tension between these views is incomplete (Nagel).

Therefore, for Nagel, the problem of war is that it forces moral agents to act under extreme duress where harm is unavoidable. For instance, a soldier may have to shoot an enemy combatant who is a teenager or make a decision that kills civilians. These acts may be necessary for victory or even survival, but they still violate deeply held moral beliefs. Recognizing moral residue means that even justified actions carry ethical burdens and moral actors must live with that discomfort. This concept resonates with veterans who suffer from post-traumatic stress not

because they were physically harmed, but because they committed or witnessed acts they found morally wrong. Their suffering reflects the emotional weight of Nagel's tragic vision of war.

Threshold Deontology: Between Principle and Consequence

One alternative is a mixed approach, often called threshold deontology. This framework attempts to reconcile absolutism and consequentialism. It generally upholds absolute moral rules but allows exceptions when the consequences of following those rules would be catastrophic. Under this view, torture might be forbidden in all cases except those involving massive imminent threats, such as a ticking time bomb scenario. The moral line remains firm but flexible under extreme circumstances. This view attempts to preserve the strengths of both deontology and consequentialism, balancing moral integrity with practical necessity. Such reasoning was evident during the Israeli case of the Bus 300 affair, where security agents tortured a captured terrorist to find out if there were more bombs on the bus. Though the act violated Israeli law, it was justified by authorities as necessary to save lives.

Moreover, legal and institutional frameworks often reflect this ethical complexity. International laws of war, such as the Geneva Conventions, attempt to set boundaries on acceptable conduct. These frameworks reflect a commitment to moral principles, such as non-combatant immunity and humane treatment of prisoners. For example, the prohibition against torture is enshrined in multiple legal codes, including the UN Convention Against Torture.

However, these laws still leave room for interpretation and discretion, especially in ambiguous situations. The law may forbid torture, but in practice, covert operations and national security concerns often create gray areas where moral lines blur. The US detention facility at

Guantanamo Bay, for instance, has been heavily criticized for violating international norms. These examples show that even with established legal structures, political and security pressures can override ethical obligations. This underscores the need for global accountability and independent institutions to monitor compliance.

Virtue Ethics: The Moral Character of War

Another relevant perspective is virtue ethics. While deontology and consequentialism focus on rules and consequences, virtue ethics focuses on the character of moral agents. Rooted in Aristotle's philosophy, virtue ethics asks what a virtuous person would do in a given situation. From this view of wartime, this might mean cultivating traits and virtues such as courage, compassion, and justice. A virtuous commander might choose to refrain from a morally questionable action not because it is strictly forbidden or has bad consequences, but because it compromises their integrity or the moral example they wish to set. For instance, during the Second World War, German officer Wilm Hosenfeld helped save the life of Jewish pianist Władysław Szpilman. This act came from a place of personal virtue despite being part of an army committing atrocities. His actions reflect how individual characters can resist broader systematic wrongs. This highlights the importance of fostering moral courage and empathy within military training and leadership.

The war also invites reflection on moral injury– the psychological harm that comes from violating one's ethical beliefs. Soldiers who engage in or witness morally troubling acts, even when deemed necessary, often suffer long-term mental and emotional consequences. This underscores the importance of maintaining ethical boundaries, even in dire circumstances, and recognizing the personal cost of crossing them.

Consider also the ethical principle of proportionality, which asks whether the military advantage gained from an action outweighs the harm caused. For instance, bombing a city to eliminate a singular enemy leader may be disproportionate if it results in massive civilian casualties. Proportionality is a key concept in just war theory and reflects the need to balance outcomes against moral principles. In the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia, military targets were often located in civilian areas. Despite efforts to minimize casualties, numerous civilian structures, including schools and bridges, were destroyed. These events illustrate how proportionality is not only a moral guideline but a practical challenge. However, can it be termed as a practical challenge in cases where civilian casualty exceeds the margins of what is considered normal in times of war? This is a reality that has been rather evident in the ongoing war in Gaza.

Ultimately, moral clarity in war is elusive. While absolutist principles should guide our moral compass, they must be applied with an understanding of context and consequence. A purely absolutist stance can be too rigid and disconnected from real-world complexities, while pure consequentialism risks justifying atrocities. The best approach lies in recognizing the moral weight of all decisions, and accepting that some actions, though justified, may still be tragic. As Nagel suggests, we must live with the tension of doing what is necessary without losing sight of what is right.

Conclusion

In conclusion, navigating moral dilemmas in war requires a careful balance between principle and practicality. While absolutist ethics offer moral clarity, they must be tempered by an understanding of context, outcomes, and human cost. A nuanced, reflective approach that

incorporates elements of deontology, consequentialism, Nagel's realism, and virtue ethics provides the best framework for addressing the ethical challenges of war. Moral decision-making in war is rarely clear-cut, but through ongoing reflection and ethical vigilance, we can strive to act with integrity even in the most trying circumstances.

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