

Copenhagen: The Moral Prosecution of War

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How do we reconcile our moral commitment to peace with the apparent necessity of war in contemporary international relations? American philosopher, William James outlined this paradoxical relationship between the seeming opposites of morality and war many years ago. He argued that war plays an integral part in shaping and defining national identities and because of this we see war as a necessary and righteous part of history – a history that no one would wish to erase. If asked about war in the present, however, many of those same people would condemn it because war is against contemporary moral values.^[1] I would argue that this paradoxical relationship with war has developed not only because of its role in history but also because of its ever-present reality.

This uncertain concept of ‘moral killing’ is one of the main themes emerging from Copenhagen. The themes of nuclear responsibility and the resulting moral dilemmas of the play are based on the accountability faced by Neils Bohr and Werner Heisenberg for helping to create the most destructive weapons the world had ever seen: nuclear bombs. The same moral issues can be readily transferred to the present day as the United States is responsible for creating and controlling the most destructive weapon the world has ever known – its own military.^[2]

During World War II, the Americans viewed the Nazis and the Japanese as the embodiment of evil; in

the contemporary era, it is terrorism that has become the face of evil in American minds. Two wars are presently being waged by the United States with the stated goal of fighting ‘evil’ terrorism. Bohr actively participated in building a nuclear bomb in order to beat the ‘evil’ Nazis and Japanese. The problem that Bohr faced and the United States now faces is that in using the methods of their enemies to defeat them, methods they believed to be heinous and barbarous, they become the very evil they are trying to destroy. Examinations of both Bohr’s and the United States’ actions beg the question: When is it morally justified to do evil in order to combat evil?

A useful starting point to further examine this question is a heated exchange between Bohr and Heisenberg on the differences between language and mathematics. Heisenberg insists, “what something means is what it means in mathematics...mathematics is sense, that’s what sense is.”^[3] Bohr, on the other hand, believes that in order for physics to make sense it must be explained in plain language; “but in the end, in the end, remember we have to be able to explain it all to Margarethe.”^[4] It is Margarethe’s role as the non-physicist that is the key to this conversation because she is concerned with the ethical implications of the actions rather than the scientific ones. In this way she plays the role of an internal moral compass. Heisenberg’s insistence on viewing the world in the abstract mathematical realm

blinds him to the moral implications of his actions.^[5] If his actions cannot be explained to Margarethe then they cannot be morally justified. Bohr's role in the exchange is the bridge between the abstract (Heisenberg) and the moral (Margarethe) because of his insistence that an explanation is necessary in order for the abstract to make sense. If this conversation is tailored slightly so that war replaces mathematics, the moral prosecution of war can be examined. In other words, evil can be used to fight evil if actions can be explained in plain language to Margarethe – our moral compass. If the actions taken cannot be explained to Margarethe, then, according to Bohr, they will not make sense. Thus, language can reconcile war and morality as long as there is a way to evaluate the credibility of the language used.

Guidelines for a 'moral way' to conduct war have existed throughout history. Two of the most prominent sets of guidelines are Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* and St. Augustine's "Just War Doctrine."^[6] More recently the Geneva Conventions have been assembled to provide an international law governing the wartime actions of states. These three sets of guidelines were all developed in different time periods and out of different religious and geographic backgrounds; however, all three provide a set of limits that permit war and killing in certain situations. Thus, they are examples of a language that attempts to provide a bridge between the paradox of war and morality.

The just war theory is one set of guidelines used to explain why war may be pursued in the interest of peace. It is a theory developed out of a long Christian tradition; however, the true value of this explanation (as with any similar guidelines) should not hinge on any historical or religious background but on

the present role it may play in creating very specific rules for war. Any criteria that seek to limit the atrocities of war while acknowledging its unfortunate necessity must be examined in order to formulate further limits which have more universal acceptance and applicability. I will further illustrate my point using two principles of the just war doctrine -the principles of right intention and just cause – to examine if both Bohr and the United States can be morally justified when killing in the name of peace. These two criteria were picked to illuminate how just war tradition can be used as a bridge between morality and war and by no means are meant to provide any sort of concrete argument for or against their legitimacy. It is through the process of examination rather than conclusion that a more useful assessment of morality and war can take place.

The paradoxical relationship to war is echoed by St Augustine. He argues that murder is always evil. But to kill to preserve good, without any notions of self interest or aggrandizement, is the lesser of two evils and can therefore be justified. He states that "war is waged for the purpose of securing peace."^[7] This is the principle of having right intention. St. Augustine equates good with peace and evil with whomever or whatever initiates war. For St. Augustine, war can only be just if it is fought in self defence against an unwarranted act of aggression. This is the principle of having just cause.

Because Germany initiated the Second World War, it would be classified as evil according to St. Augustine's criteria. When Bohr undertook work on the Manhattan Project, he did so undoubtedly with the knowledge that his creation of a nuclear technology and the subsequent evil that this technology would release was going to be used with the right intention of gaining peace and

with just cause because Germany initiated the war. Although the bomb could cause unimaginable horror, Bohr can be seen as morally justified because the evil of nuclear technology was the lesser evil when compared to Nazi atrocities.

The wars against terror being waged by the United States are being fought with the original premise of retaliation against the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. According to St. Augustine's criteria, the war in Afghanistan would be morally justified because the Taliban harboured Al Qaeda, which was responsible for initiating an act of aggression against the United States. The war in Iraq, however, cannot be justified according to the above criteria. There was never any link proven between Al Qaeda and Iraq; therefore, the first act of physical aggression was undertaken by the United States. If the principle of just cause holds true then there can be no moral justification for initiating an unprovoked act of aggression against Iraq; moreover, the principle of right intention states that war should be pursued only with the intention of gaining peace and must be separate from any notions of self interest.^[8]

Under the framework of the two just war principles of just cause and right intention, using evil to fight evil is morally justifiable only in the pursuit of peace and against an act of unwarranted aggression. St. Augustine's criteria provide one explanation through which war can be morally justified in certain necessary instances. Bohr's actions and the United States' war against the Taliban were morally justified according to the just war criteria – in other words their actions could be explained to Margarethe. On the other hand, the war against Iraq cannot be justified because

the United States was the aggressor – Margarethe would not be able to understand any explanations for the war in Iraq because a language was not used that could bridge the gap between morality and war. If there must be war, then any and all explanations that seek to limit killing must be examined regardless of historical or religious backgrounds in order to work towards a more universal understanding of a 'moral war'.

Sources

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Endnotes

[1] William James, "The Moral Equivalent of War," 1906, <http://www.constitution.org/wj/meow.htm> (accessed on October 21, 2006).

[2] As of 2005 the United States Military expenditure was \$518,100,000,000. In other words, more than the next 20 nations combined including the biggest European countries and China.

[3] Michael Frayn, *Copenhagen*, 67.

[4] *Ibid*, 67.

[5] Reed Way Dasenbrock, "Copenhagen: the Drama of History," *Contemporary Literature* 45 no. 2 (2004): 218-238.

[6] Richard Shelley Hartigan, "Saint Augustine on War and Killing: the Problem of the Innocent," *Journal of the History of Ideas*. 27 no. 2 (1966): 195-204.

[7] Hartigan, "Saint Augustine on War," 197.

[8] The United States attacked Iraq on the grounds of eradication of terrorism and not elimination of Al Qaeda. Chris Dowd, "Unjust and Indefensible: Iraq a Case Study," *Commonweal*, 133 no. 17 (2006): 19.

[3] Michael Frayn, *Copenhagen*, 67.

[4] *Ibid*, 67.

[5] Reed Way Dasenbrock, "Copenhagen: the Drama of History," *Contemporary Literature* 45 no. 2 (2004): 218-238.

[6] Richard Shelley Hartigan, "Saint Augustine on War and Killing: the Problem of the Innocent," *Journal of the History of Ideas*. 27 no. 2 (1966): 195-204.

[7] Hartigan, "Saint Augustine on War," 197.

[8] The United States attacked Iraq on the grounds of eradication of terrorism and not elimination of Al Qaeda. Chris Dowd, "Unjust and Indefensible: Iraq a Case Study," *Commonweal*, 133 no. 17 (2006): 19.