

Copenhagen: Is War a Necessary Evil?

Exploring Justifications for War

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Is war a necessary evil? This is a difficult question, further complicated by the innate variability and irony of state-directed violence and aggression in the international arena. Any discussion involving war is bound to be thorny. This human act presents a sizeable moral quandary that shows no sign of resolution. On one side exists a reflexive pacifism, which reacts to the mere mention of the word “war” and is inspired by an impracticable idealism.[1] The other side consists of a hard-boiled Realpolitik mind-set, triggered by influential philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes in *The Leviathan*. Regardless of one’s moral stance, even the most vocal and ardent critics of war acknowledge that it is necessarily a rational enterprise, and most insist that wars make sense to the extent that they promise some utilitarian gain.[2] In between these two poles is a multitude of arguments, beliefs and ideologies.

The conceptualizations of war discuss the political and sociological experience at both a national and personal level. Aristotle, in *Nichomachean Ethics*, proclaimed that “We make war that we may live in peace.” At the explicit state level, Thomas Hobbes notes that war is an attitude: “By war is meant a state of affairs, which may exist even while its operations are not continued.”[3] Karl von Clausewitz further clarifies this state focus, adding

that “war is the continuation of politics by other means.”[4]

In this essay, I use the definition put forward by Carl Von Clausewitz, who defines war as “an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.”[5] Through an exploration of the different interpretations regarding the relationship between morality and war, I will attempt to explain why this topic has remained so divisive and contentious. I will then try to find a middle ground in the midst of this debate, concluding on forgiveness, as evidenced in South Africa in 1995 with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This commission was based on the Ubuntu tradition that had been observed for millennia by the indigenous peoples of South Africa. Thanks to this commission, the new regime of Nelson Mandela was able to leave behind years of Apartheid and forge a new nation which has reasonably come to terms with its past.[6]

Proponents of war use a determinist approach to explain war as a result of humanity’s inherently bellicose nature. English scholar Micheal Howard sheds light on the international political order, and human nature in general, by stating: “For better or worse, war was an institution which could not be eliminated from the international system. All that could be done about it was, so far as possible, to codify its rationale and to civilize its means.”[7] This defeatist approach to international relations and human nature causes many problems. By

suggesting war is an inherent part of human nature, Howard and others leave humanity powerless in the face of our own über-rationality and base interests.

A tension exists in conceptualizations of war, between its evident chaos and variability, and attempts to portray it as a predictable and pragmatic outcome of rational, national policy. Thomas Powers begs to differ from this latter view. He believes that wars are post hoc inventions created by the victors to justify the slaughter.^[8] In sum, the winner decides what the war was about. In most cases these justifications are packaged with the rhetoric of morality and the language of freedom and democracy. Similarly, in Copenhagen, Margarethe reminds the audience that in creating our narratives based on our memories, there is a tendency to make everything seem "heroically abstract and logical," when in actuality these events are usually mired in confusion and marked by the absence of rationality.

Jean-Paul Sartre, a libertarian, discounted all forms of determinism in human nature. He claimed man is free – absolutely free – to choose his next action: to fire a gun, to surrender, to join the resistance, or to betray the resistance. Based on Sartre's assertion that we have unlimited choices, it is crucial for society to collectively evaluate what values in our culture are worth protecting, and at what cost. This evaluation can happen at the lowest units of society. Consider for example the dilemma facing a parent in a nation at war: at what cost, and for what reason, will he or she 'donate' a son or daughter for their country? This parent is constantly conscious that on the battlefield his or her child can kill and be killed. St. Aquinas argued that in the case of resorting to war, it is expressly required to have the right intention and

act for the common good. This means that one has to promote good and avoid evil.^[9] This noble approach to war suggested by St. Aquinas is a far cry from what we witness today in modern society, and war skeptics would seem to be justified in their opposition. In most countries, the military has drained resources from all other social functions. A ghoulish example of this is North Korea, where starvation coexists with nuclear weapons development. In the United States, the military is responsible for 60% of the national debt, and to date, has spent 457 billion dollars fighting terrorism.^[10]

A thesis and an antithesis usually dictate a synthesis, and in the war debate this is found in the form of the general acceptance of the dichotomy between war and peace. Unfortunately, key problems arise when we place war and peace on different ends of the same pole, such as the issue of viewing peace as merely the absence of war. In their opposition we fit these outcomes in a binary relationship through reductive logic processes, and thus immediately eliminate the possibility for further options and analyses (namely a middle ground) in conceptualizing war, peace and any 'other'. In Copenhagen, Frayn forces the audience to explore the middle ground, by locating them in the ambiguous space between Heisenberg's certainty and Bohr's suggestiveness.

How a state balances the imperatives between war and other choices cannot and should not be reduced to a simple analysis of the two conditions of war and peace. This is further supported by the complexity of human beings at the micro level, where they exhibit varying and sometimes contradictory actions that cannot be placed under singular motives.

Forgiveness as a way of Moving Beyond our Past

In the end, one is forced to ask whether a concept or system exists that has been able to escape the binary thinking, and has tried to reconcile the two concepts of war and peace. In my opinion, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, based on the Ubuntu tradition as earlier mentioned in this essay, has been able to do this effectively. This system challenges the binary thinking that has become so pervasive in modern debates on wars and their necessity. Ubuntu played a major role in forging a national consciousness in South Africa, and helped with the process of reconciliation and forgiveness after decades of Apartheid.^[11] Though a minor event in the global order, Ubuntu suggests that human beings can respond to inhuman acts by being calm, tolerant, and perhaps more decent than the killers and oppressors deserve.

Before we dismiss forgiveness and the power of forgetting, let us remember that this can be a profound transaction. To not forgive or forget is to yield oneself to another's control. One is controlled by the other's initiatives and is locked into a sequence of action and response.

Forgiveness, as a doctrine for avoiding war, is a tangible and laudable goal that needs to be explored by all parties involved in war initiatives. It is a difficult human act to perform, and should not be viewed as a weakness or with indifference, but as the only way to move beyond the past and constructively build a future. The alternative, refusing to forgive, makes us prisoners of our previous history – condemned to forever relive and dwell upon our grievances.

Sources

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Endnotes

[1] Inis L. Claude Jr, "Just Wars: Doctrines and Institutions," *Political Science Quarterly* (1980): 85.

[2] Missner Marshall, "Hobbes's Method in *Leviathan*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* (1977): 610.

[3] Paul Halsall, "Thomas Hobbes: *Leviathan*, Chaps 13-14, 1651," War as a Continuation of Politics, Modern History SourceBook, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/hobbeslev13.html> (accessed February 20, 2007).

[4] Vincent J. Esposito, "War as a Continuation of Politics," *Military Affairs* (1954): 19.

[5] Sir Micheal Howard, and John F. Guilmartin Jr., "Two Historians in Technology and War," Strategic Studies Institute, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/ssi/2hist.pdf>.

[6] Lorna McGregor, "Individual Accountability in South Africa: Cultural Optimum or Political Facade?" *American Journal of International Law* (2001): 34

[7] Howard, "Two Historians," 19.

[8] Ira Chernus, "War and Myth: 'The Show Must Go on'," *American Academy of Religion* (1985): 451.

[9] Howard Zinn, "Just and Unjust War," *Www.tcrnews2.com. Catholic Reflections and Reports* (accessed February 12, 2007).

[10] Anup Shah, "World Military spending,"

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[11] McGregor, "Individual Accountability in South Africa," 37.