

CONCEPTUALIZATIONS
OF WAR AND MORAL
INJURY
IMPLICATIONS FOR
COMMANDERS AND
THERAPISTS

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This article traces competing conceptualizations of war, in particular the views of war found in amoral realism and pacifism, to demonstrate that the way any individual views war matters, both to the consciences of our military members and to the intellectual and moral basis from which society approaches today's moral injury crisis. When as a culture we perceive or characterize war as entirely evil or as outside morality, we deny its place as a legitimate and enduring tool of good statecraft. This denial in turn creates distinct challenges for psychological and spiritual care providers and commanders.

Is war inherently evil? There are two ways in which someone might accept the idea that war is never morally valid. First, one could believe war never has a valid reason, and all efforts related to its preparation and practice are condemnable—this is essentially a pure pacifist's position. The second, and likely much more common view, is that while war is immoral it is sometimes necessary, say, to fight off invasion. While both positions can be intelligently pursued and examined, both perspectives can also inflict immense psychological damage upon the people who actually have to don the uniforms our armed forces wear. Ironically, condemning war itself instead of focusing on the roles and responsibilities of the military and its individual members may lead to the worst forms of warfighter condemnation.

The Morality of War

The profession of arms, for the sake of its members and the community it serves, continually must reevaluate its understanding of war and the moral hazard it can bring. Identifying moral injury—the possibility of damage to the psyche from participation in events one believes to be immoral—in war as an issue is not new. In Shakespeare's 1599 play *Henry V*, the king, disguised on the eve of battle as a common soldier, debates these matters with two other soldiers.¹ All three characters show

concern over
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1. See Paula Shanks Kaurin, *On Obedience: Contrasting Philosophies for the Military, Citizenry and Community* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 66.

the interior, or psychological, life of the warfighter. All of them want to know how much guilt a soldier should bear for any deeds he commits in the context of war. Each believes the relationship between war and morality is a crucial part of the answer.

For the resigned yet loyal soldier Bates, war and morality have parted company. Only the king as decisionmaker bears moral responsibility for starting the war and for anything that happens in war. The common soldier, cut off from analyzing the justice of the war's cause, has one moral obligation—do not desert. Bates insists, "If his cause be wrong, our obedience to the King wipes the crime of it out of us."² For Bates, soldiers are absolved of anything else they experience. From this we can conclude Bates accepts war as an amoral project, which identifies with a *realpolitik*, or amoral realist, perspective. *Realpolitik* rejects a role for moral norms in foreign policy decisions; amoral realists often adopt a *realpolitik* approach, arguing the world as it is does not require nor can it allow the luxury of moral norms in such decisions. Under this view the warfighter is no longer a moral decisionmaker.

In contrast, the witty and cynical Williams is a more complex character. Like Bates, Williams holds the king solely accountable for the decision to make war and for the war's conduct in a general sense: "But if the cause be not good, the King himself hath a heavy reckoning to make."³ Where does Williams begin to part company from Bates? Williams appears to contend that a soldier's private misdeeds in war fall not on the king but on the soldier. "Tis certain, every man that dies ill, the ill upon his own head, the King is not to answer it."⁴ At first glance, by admitting the soldier still bears responsibility for some of his actions, Williams appears to be validating the soldier as a moral agent.

But closer scrutiny reveals the above words mask his true objective. By the end of the discussion, it becomes apparent that Shakespeare was using this character to represent negative theories of authority and politics. Those who hold such theories see these concepts as unnatural or unnecessary for human fulfillment, rejecting the view that politics and authority represent good and are instrumental to achieve justice, and recasting authority and politics as the tools of control that the powerful create to legitimize their oppression. Liberation or human fulfillment in this view requires dismantling of authority and politics. Until the time of liberation occurs, adherents see authority and politics as regrettable, if useful, evils.

While Williams may respect power, he hates both authority and politics. In an ironic twist, Williams intends to show that while it is the king who thrusts his soldiers into the war, the soldier's untimely and disgraceful demise is his own to suffer. This is the true meaning of his line "the ill upon his own head." Williams believes the king—as the state personified—is motivated only by his own self-glorification, without any regard for his soldiers' sufferings. His soldiers are mere means to achieve his interests.

2. *Henry V*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Washington Square Press, 1995), 4.1.136–7.

3. *Henry V*, 4.1.138–9.

4. *Henry V*, 4.1.193–94.

Williams is not interested in a moral defense of war, nor does he believe that individual warfighters have any control over their lives, judgment, or moral fate.

For Williams authority and politics are evils. There is no legitimate authority in society but only the power some hold over others. Politics is masked greed and war a mere contest over power. Living or dead, the soldier is a tool of the uncaring state, bereft of a remedy for the damage that war brings. Here war is an unjust and immoral contest of elites over power that reduces the soldier to a tool of the state. This view links Williams to much of the premise behind modern pacifism.

Henry disagrees with both. For the king, war, morality, and the possibility of goodness are inextricably linked, and the soldier retains his moral judgment appropriate to his authority and role. Incidentally, his view may be the nearest representation of Shakespeare's actual beliefs on this issue.⁵ The demands of justice at times require war as a moral good, even when evils are produced that are not specifically sought. In Henry's formulation war is neither good nor evil but depends for its moral stature on how it starts, how the warring parties conduct it, and to what ends they are pursuing it. He states, "Methinks I could not die anywhere so contented as in the King's company; his cause being just and his quarrel honorable."⁶

Like Bates and Williams, the king does not impute to common soldiers the liberty to pick the wars in which they will participate. This requirement would unfairly punish soldiers for decisions over which they have no control—"Every subject's duty is the king's."⁷ Yet war is never outside the bounds of morality; similarly, the Uniform Code of Military Justice applies in both war and peace.

Thus, morality is inescapable: "Now, if these men have defeated the law and outrun native punishment, though they can outstrip men, they have no wings to fly from God."⁸ Day-to-day morality is no mere convenience to be cast aside in grave circumstances, nor is such morality only for the king or only for the rank-and-file. Accordingly, the same line dividing good and evil guides us, in peacetime and in war, and governs the king and everyone else. For Henry, the warfighter at any level retains his judgment and his role as moral decisionmaker over his actions and intentions. This has implications for statecraft as well as for the individual warfighter.

Under Henry's view, the state and the warfighter must uphold justice at all times. The state must take care to conform its warring to the requirements of justice and never to mere interests. Or, put another way, conforming to justice is an enduring state interest that regards its obligations to the common good of its people and its military members. Warfighters in turn never abandon their judgment or their conscience. As Henry proclaims, "Every subject's soul is his own."⁹

5. Joseph Pearce, *The Quest for Shakespeare* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 184, 197–99.

6. *Henry V*, 4.1.130–32.

7. *Henry V*, 4.1.182–83.

8. *Henry V*, 4.1.172–74.

9. *Henry V*, 4.1.183.

A review of the three characters' perspectives demonstrates their range of views on morality in war. Bates: "The morality of war is not my decision—not my problem." Williams: "The morality of war is corrupted by politics and the selfish interests of rulers, thus all war is morally bankrupt—not my problem." Only Henry's view professes an indelible link across war, morality, and the warfighter: "War is a tool of statecraft that must always uphold justice and the common good; the warfighter must practice obedience and must always serve this exact conception of war. War's moral dimension is everyone's problem, according to the dictates of their role and authority." The next question is: How do we judge the merits of each to guide us to a clearer picture of the basis of moral injury and to better therapeutic paths? Of the three, at first glance it appears the perspectives of Bates and Williams are more expedient at addressing moral injury. What if, instead, the opposite were true?

Amoral Realism, Pacifism, and War

What if adopting Bates' view increases the likelihood of moral injury, and the king's would reduce moral injury? What if Williams' perspective is the most pernicious, damaging the warfighter's psyche prior to moral hazard through the insistence that all war is entirely immoral? Bates and Williams seem to absolve individual warfighters from moral blame by their claims that war is either not their decision or already a corrupt project. Instead, both claims widen the path to moral injury by instilling the questionable beliefs that a) the individual warfighter is no longer a fit judge of his actions, having given over the task of judgment to higher authority; or b) the warfighter no longer has the option to seek and to practice justice, because war is inherently immoral.

The concern here is that the realpolitik and pacifism arising from such conceptualizations of war may be poisonous to our military members' psyches. This article argues that the invalidation of war as a legitimate, enduring tool of good statecraft undermines the mindset and therapeutic tasks that best respond to the challenge of moral injury.

Tracing this delegitimization of war from root structure to its fruit is vital to this analysis and to a remedy. In the root structure there is a flaw in this thinking—an epistemological flaw—that presumes all war as pathology, which leads to a presumption against war. War thus conceived translates this epistemological crisis into a metaphysical (knowledge of good and evil) error, which can be thought of as the stem—the verdict of war as "evil" occurs before the decision to go to war in the first place.

And what of the fruit? These combined errors in this line of thinking reduce life and war to a contest of material forces, unconnected to moral ends. This reduction to material forces, which Clausewitz constantly rejected, is a consistent thread in US strategic thinking, and is easy to recognize in this literature.¹⁰ From Jomini to Mahan, these authors usually express their reductive worldview in terms of various forms of

10. See J. Boone Bartholomees, "The Issue of Attrition," *Parameters* 40, no. 3 (2010): 5.

competition.¹¹ Note the problem here: when war is thus reduced to a contest of material forces, everything in war shares in the reduction—even people. The fruit of the invalidation of war, then, is that the individual warfighter is reduced to a state functionary—an unwelcome and unhelpful characterization. One who is taught not to value their interior life may not attend to its health and may not respond to treatment. How does one reach the humanity of people who see themselves as less than human?

Pathology and the Presumption against War

Perhaps an underlying cultural belief in all war as evil, as examined above, paired with a belief the world is wicked in its design, partly accounts for the current moral injury crisis. A recent article by US military officers argues for a type of strategic cunning as the best response to a “dangerous and disorderly” world: “The world is defined by both conflict and complexity. It is wicked, therefore, in two senses of the word. It is both dangerous and disorderly.” The authors offer *Métis* as their guide, the Greek mythological goddess of wise counsel. According to the article, the most common definition of *métis* is “cunning intelligence.”¹² The basis of their formula for strategic success following *Métis*’ example is simple: reject simple formulas. The problem with such writings, which presuppose firm knowledge of the world as wicked, is not their advocacy of adaptive thinking, but the epistemological crisis that shapes the ideas these writings contain.

An enduring idea in philosophy has insisted—without merit—that reality as we know it, the world, is flawed in its core structure. There is an inherent brokenness *ab initio*, or from the beginning.¹³ This same idea informs the “*Métis*” article.

There is a twofold problem flowing from this wicked world idea that constitutes an epistemological crisis. As the study of how we know anything, epistemology can help us identify inaccurate or unsupported thinking. First, the tradition of believing the world to be inherently wicked offers no proof of the inherent brokenness—at least, no more proof than what was offered by Machiavelli or Hobbes, both of whom tried anecdotally to prove an inherent design flaw in humanity. Second, the tradition’s emphasis on this idea of corruption in the design fosters a belief that, since the world is wicked at its source, war itself is immoral before it is even practiced and regardless of its cause. How, exactly, is this an epistemological crisis?

11. Antulio Echevarria, *War’s Logic: Strategic Thought and the American Way of War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 3–4.

12. Mindi Furnier, Jason Grant, and Jason Trew, “*Métis*: Strategic Sense for a Wicked World,” OTH Over the Horizon, July 13, 2020, <https://overthehorizonmdos.wpcomstaging.com/>.

13. See, for example, G. R. S. Meade, *Valentinus the Gnostic* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2010); Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Luigi Ricci (public domain, 1921); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Thomas Commons (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999); and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *System of Economic Contradictions, or the Philosophy of Misery*, trans. Benjamin Ricketson Tucker (Whithorn, UK: Anodos Books, 2019).

The above philosophical position on war has planted the beliefs that all war is inherently immoral, war's necessity is not an excuse, and everyone in war is tainted by its immorality. Yet, this conceptualization of war is neither demonstrably accurate nor grounded in a truth deeper than itself. This is unfortunately where articles like "Métis" take us. Everyone involved in the war effort, no matter how necessary or (post hoc) justifiable the use of military force, is guilty in their existence—before they act.

James Turner Johnson, the most prominent scholar to trace this philosophical position, has labeled this view the "presumption against war." Briefly stated, this view holds war in all its forms to be "inherently suspect," an instrument of achieving interests but incapable of achieving justice, and accordingly should be exceedingly rare and requiring mammoth effort in defense of its necessity—hence the "presumption against."¹⁴ In this description the related conceptualization of war is neither a path to good nor even neutral: rather, war is a pathology, immoral even when necessary. In his writing Johnson frequently points to certain contemporary scholars as contributors to the presumption against war.

A "Presumption against War"

Among the philosophers who have accelerated the presumption against war, Johnson selected two, Paul Ramsey and Michael Walzer, partly due to precisely their reputation as part of the twentieth-century recovery of the classical just war tradition.¹⁵ It is ironic that two of the biggest names in this recovery may have also helped narrow the idea of a just war to an immoral act.

In the 1960s under the shadow of the Cold War nuclear weapons standoff, Ramsey called for a return to just war arguments as a middle ground between pacifism and amoral realism, re-energizing debate on the possibility of justice in war and justice achieved through war.¹⁶ While this has been overall a positive influence on war scholarship, Ramsey's contribution to the presumption against war—more to the point of this article—lay in his attempt to "brush up" just war ideas to accommodate the use of nuclear weapons.

This valuable and necessary effort to update just war thinking also opened a door. Specifically, Ramsey sought to reduce the complexity of the just war position to a few abstract rules broad enough to cover any type of war including conflicts involving nuclear weapons.¹⁷ For example, he proposed applying the principles of discrimination, what distinguishes classes of persons as legal or illegal targets, and proportionality,

14. Christian Nikolaus Braun, "James Turner Johnson and the Roman Catholic Just War Tradition," in *Responsibility and Restraint: James Turner Johnson and the Just War Tradition*, ed. Eric Patterson and Marc LiVecche (Middletown, RI: Stone Tower Press, 2020), 132.

15. See Gregory Reichberg et al., eds., *The Ethics of War* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006).

16. Braun, "James Turner Johnson," 128.

17. J. T. Johnson, "The Just War Idea: The State of the Question," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 23, no. 1 (2006): 174.

what military planners, commanders, and operators determine is the amount of force necessary to achieve military objectives, in a very generalized sense.

The problem resides less in Ramsey's own thoughts and more in others' work that followed his logic. In fact, Johnson credits him with being concerned about a "scholars' war against just war" based on the idea that methods of modern war are too brutal to be just uses of force.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Ramsey de-emphasizes the nuances found in earlier just war thinkers. According to Johnson, this has allowed other scholars to claim that in modern contexts the lines are so blurred between combatants and other classes, and urban or cyber environments so congested and fluid, that no use of military force today can survive these restrictions, thus opening the door to moral injury.

In other words, the state can make a case for the moral use of military force in the abstract sense, but the ways in which states fight modern wars—and where they fight them—make it virtually impossible today for a state to use military force as a moral good in a practical sense. Thus, on the basis of "modern warfare" as fought today, pacifists can reassert claims that all war is immoral, and amoral realists can claim that moral restrictions are irrelevant because no one can apply them to the conditions of modern warfare.

As it does with Ramsey, the literature credits Walzer for restoring just war thinking to the discussion of the morality of war, but rarely identifies how his work, starting with his 1977 book *Just and Unjust Wars*—widely read in professional military education contexts—breaks from the classical just war tradition in certain respects that may exacerbate moral injury.¹⁹

Walzer, significantly, never defends that the state can judge for itself whether it has a morally valid reason to go to war, whereas this position is the starting point for all classical just war thinking. Instead, Walzer proposes his theory as the soundest alignment of war and morality due to its use of unnuanced abstract reason and historical case studies to derive an apparent set of unwavering principles to rule over all uses of force as just or unjust. In short, for a state deciding whether to go to war, Walzer's theory proposes that reason by its own lights can produce the set of rules to fit any circumstances, such that the state no longer needs to apply its own judgment as to the moral fitness of the war.

Analyzing this theory reveals that by removing from the state the opportunity to judge from circumstances, Walzer's point of departure for judging the morality of any war is the presumption that only a war to oppose an unambiguously recognizable evil could possibly gain admittance as a moral good in itself.²⁰ Thus, while allowing that states will pursue necessary interests, Walzer denies the state full autonomy in determining its best moral path to a just peace.

Studying Walzer further, the starting point of his thought produces four jarring core beliefs: (1) war is always barbaric and immoral; (2) states do what is necessary

18. Johnson, "Just War Idea," 175.

19. See Johnson, 175.

20. Johnson, 175.

even when it is evil; (3) morality for states operates on a “sliding scale” such that the more grave the situation, the more evil is permissible; and (4) such actions retain the quality of being morally evil regardless of circumstances. While the book has earned a reputation as an able contemporary defense of the just use of military force, in the light of these core beliefs the actual contents of the book reflect a strong argument against war in all its forms.

Walzer’s bias against war is more understandable when considering that the book arose not strictly from his reflections as a philosopher but from his political activism against the Vietnam War.²¹ Walzer’s characterization of war as evil even when necessary becomes more clear in his bizarre treatment of British Royal Air Force General Arthur “Bomber” Harris—he calls this section of the book “The Nature of Necessity.”

Walzer recognizes Harris’ “necessary” role in planning and directing the bombing of German civilians as targets, and contrastingly argues that a national conscience cannot endure such acts. Walzer’s formula for recovering the state after war is to avoid honoring its people involved in the unavoidable, intentional evil that is part of war, and as a state to “go back” to being morally good.²² For Walzer, war is a temporary problem that education and international institutions will eventually solve.²³ War is regrettable and temporarily necessary when it is the only means for the state to continue its physical existence, until “the last war,” followed by the eradication of war itself.

“War as Pathology”

What follows when war is no longer seen as a legitimate statecraft tool, even when necessary, but comes to resemble a pathology—a disease? Characterizing war as a disease instead of an available tool of statecraft leads to a presumption against war so restrictive that even while theorists such as Ramsey and Walzer admit a “good war” is theoretically possible, it is hard for others following their work to show that in the modern era a truly good war is realistic. For example, one scholar maintains the possibility of a good war is indispensable to the exercise of restraint in war and in decisions to initiate war. Conversely, pacifism and other views that reject all good wars lose the capacity to practice restraint in decisions about war.²⁴

This level of demand renders war tainted, tied up in evil *ab initio*. If this is the case, what are military members supposed to think about themselves as willing participants in the “machine of war” if war is so tainted? In fact, these conceptualizations can be traced to a source preceding Ramsey and Walzer.

An earlier view developed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Abbé de Saint-Pierre, and later, Immanuel Kant, and grounded in a theory of politics, holds that war is not just violent but inhuman. Kant’s view not only has impacted the growth of pacifism in

21. Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), xix.

22. Walzer, 323–25.

23. Johnson, “Just War Idea,” 175.

24. See G. E. M. Anscombe, “War and Murder,” in *Nuclear Weapons: A Catholic Response*, ed. Walter Stein (London: Sheed and Ward, 1961).

Western thought but also challenges any who justify military service as an enduring moral good. Testimonies of combat veterans, for example, imply warfighters both want to perceive war as a moral good under certain conditions and, contrastingly, believe that war as a moral good is nevertheless impossible in a practical sense.²⁵

Many scholars have located Kant's work, especially his book, *Perpetual Peace*, as a guiding force in the development of pacifistic thought, beginning with the idea that war is a foreign body to human activity and can be eliminated. One scholar, for example, finds Kant had a significant role in the characterization of war as not only barbaric but also illegitimate. This view reconceives war and all combatants as irrevocably evil, and recasts states as incapable of being good judges of when to turn to war; here there are no more "good wars."²⁶

How does a view of war as inhuman derive from a theory of politics? One analysis has proposed Kantian thought on war is steeped in the political ideas of two other scholars, Rousseau and Saint-Pierre.²⁷ Considered together, these men provide a basis for politics in human life that one can only describe as a negative (as opposed to a positive) theory of politics. For Aristotle and many others, politics is itself both a good and a means to securing the common good for the political community—the state. Politics is thus good, natural, and necessary to man, which is why famously Aristotle has referred to humans as inherently *zoon politicos*—or "political animals."²⁸

Within a negative theory of politics, nurtured by the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Enlightenment movements across Europe, authority is itself unnatural—no persons by nature are supposed to endure the rule of any other body over them.²⁹ One can now clearly see the likely connection between Rousseau and Saint-Pierre and Kant's theory of individual self-sovereignty, which is the idea that could every person become the consummate student of reason, they would have no need for any rule above them. Given such a radical interpretation of freedom, as freedom from any structure whatsoever, even the state is suspect.

The bona fide break with previous thought identified here, specifically the plan for some future desirable life without the state, brings into sharp relief the question as to whether the state is justified to exist at all. Whereas thinkers like Thomas Aquinas wrote of the state as the "perfect community" because it could best by itself see to the

25. See, for example, Dan Schilling, interview, "Gathering of Eagles" Annual Symposium, Air Command and Staff College, Maxwell AFB, AL, 2022.

26. James Q. Whitman, *The Verdict of Battle: The Law of Victory and the Making of Modern War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 250.

27. Reichberg et al., *Ethics of War*, 519.

28. *Politics*, trans. E. Barker (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1946).

29. See Thomas Sowell, *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).

achievement of its people's common good, for Rousseau in *State of War* and Saint-Pierre in *Project for Perpetual Peace*, the state was an artificial structure.³⁰

The state enforces unnatural bondage over persons, and they imagined a future condition where states and monarchs and the enforcement of law would be unnecessary and irrelevant. They reconceived war as a product of this artificial structure and an expression of the greed and malevolence of political rulers—thus war is not and never could be human, nor would it be acceptable as a political solution in the idealized future to come.³¹

Here both men struggled: What ideal future condition would allow humankind to fulfill its meaning? As Kant would later agree, the answer was to be found neither in politics nor in the state. While Saint-Pierre and Rousseau indicated a preference for some sort of supranational solution—a proto-United Nations but with binding power—over squabbling, violent, and petty kingdoms, neither thinker could find an easily achievable alternative to the state. Instead, they seemed to operate on simply a kind of faith, a faith that an enlightened humanity, or an enlightened portion of humanity, would manufacture its own better future: its own salvation, and a salvation even from politics itself.³²

A concept of war as a legitimate tool of statecraft under certain conditions cannot survive extended contact with such a view of politics and the state. Both the state and the state's wars become categorically immoral, with significant implications for the warfighter and for moral injury, and for the metaphysics that guide what we think about both. Kant's role in this development is manifest in his works such as *Perpetual Peace*, and in his sustained, even "decisive" influence today on modern philosophy and international relations theory.³³

War and Evil: A Metaphysical Error

The epistemological crisis has metastasized in the West, criminalizing the state and the state's wars in the eyes of many. This perhaps brings to mind Augustine of Hippo's (354–430 A.D.) famous dictum: "Without justice, what is the state but a gang of robbers?"³⁴ The state is not immoral in itself; rather, the justification of the state is connected to its objects—order, justice, and peace. If the state is a temporary and unnatural structure, setting its authority against individual rights, then any action the state pursues including war is similarly tainted. The state is corrupt and corrupting.

30. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica: The Complete Edition*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Catholic Way Publishing, 2014); Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The State of War*, in *Basic Political Writings*, trans. and ed. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, Inc., 2011); and Charles Irénée Castel de Saint-Pierre, *A Project for Perpetual Peace*, trans. Edith M. Nuttall (London: R. Cobden-Sanderson, 1927).

31. Reichberg et al., *Ethics of War*, 481–82.

32. Reichberg et al., 496–502.

33. Reichberg et al., 518.

34. Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), IV.4.

The works of some modern scholars indicate the lack of clarification of terms, and their misuse, can produce a metaphysical error. As the study of the ultimate essences of things and questions of existence, metaphysics can guide us to properly determine a thing, event, or action as good or evil, in this way illuminating our moral judging faculty. Josef Pieper's classic essay *Abuse of Language, Abuse of Power* reveals that since words are what we use to express reality to ourselves and to one another, when we are indifferent to the truth of how we use those words, the corruption in our language can corrupt our perceptions and actions.³⁵

A stark example is Nazi Germany's use of terms like therapeutic to describe forced immoral sterilizations and eventually the murder of German citizens labeled as mentally or socially unfit.³⁶ In short, a lack of distinction in our use of terms can confuse our capacity as moral judge and damage our ability to tell good from evil.

This also means our military members may believe and tell themselves they are "evil" or have done evil with the intent to commit evil—when they have not. The problem can be expressed this way: confusion over terms and understandings can lead to metaphysical confusion, specifically improper moral judgments such as calling something that is a moral good a moral evil, and ultimately manifest in avoidable harms even at the individual level. It is important, then, to trace how the root conceptualization of war as evil leads into a trap.

The root conceptualization of war as evil is critical in shaping the two intellectual responses of amoral realism and pacifism, which together threaten to reduce the military member to a condemned lackey of the state—one of the "material forces of war," and that this is "the crisis behind the crisis" of moral injury. What happens when military members are not supposed to have consciences anymore, but they still do? An invaluable guide here is philosopher and just war scholar Marc LiVecche, especially in his treatment of the widely influential twentieth-century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr.³⁷

The Reduction of the Warfighter

I, too, am beginning to look like a wolf.

—Jean Larteguy, on the French Army's adoption of torture during the Algerian War (1954–1962)³⁸

Trying to reconcile Christian teaching with the traumas of twentieth-century warfare, Niebuhr developed a dire, conflicted formula that condemns the warfighter to a less than human status, possibly due to the theologian's tortured interior conflict. He vacillated between espousing extreme pacifism and demanding a total war against

35. Josef Pieper, *Abuse of Language, Abuse of Power*, 1st American ed., trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1992).

36. See Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

37. Marc LiVecche, *The Good Kill: Just War and Moral Injury* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

38. Jean Larteguy, *The Centurions* (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), 345.

Germany prior to both world wars.³⁹ Based on his narrow interpretation of the Christian Gospel, Niebuhr concluded all war is unremittably evil. He became stuck on the idea that while the Gospel commands all people always to love, “love is impossible in this world.”⁴⁰ How could God command us to do something that is impossible?

His answer to this terrible dilemma was that military members, while still made for love and to love, must prepare to make war and turn to “hate,” thus becoming evil on the inside due to the violation of the commandment to love. Niebuhr’s solution led him into four questionable judgments.

1. The purpose of the war—its cause and objective—is irrelevant to war’s status as evil.
2. Obligations to protect third-party innocent human life are irrelevant to war’s evil status as an immoral and exclusive “two-party” assault of brother against brother.
3. One can assess the evil moral status of war itself, of war as a whole, as a concept in the abstract, ignoring the events and judgments of history—there are no specific conditions or circumstances that could render a war decision or effort morally valid.
4. War is always a mere contest for power, foreclosing the possibility of a good war.⁴¹

These judgments seem to leave no space for honorable military service.

Of course, Niebuhr alone is not responsible for the conceptualization of war as always evil. Nor is Niebuhr to blame for two of the conceptual outcomes of the “war is evil” formula. Realpolitik-style amoral realism and Western pacifism both predated Niebuhr. Yet this analysis of Niebuhr’s thought process clarifies the connection between a culture’s thoughts about war and about military service, and how this connection might affect the interior life of those serving.

What is most concerning about Niebuhr-type thinking is that given the above examples of some of his judgments, it all leads to one conclusion—military service is necessary but evil. Under the “war is evil” verdict, all resources in the war effort, including human, only have value in their contribution to victory and have lost any other status they have enjoyed in the community. The military member is expelled from society; Niebuhr treats soldiers as “anomalies” who no longer fit into the culture from which they came.⁴²

Does the military uniform make one a monster? Niebuhr appears to assent to this, the “dirty hands” thesis, in his simple act of setting love and justice against one another—for him they are incompatible.⁴³ Rejecting the Christian notion that Christ embodies

39. LiVecche, *Good Kill*, 46–51.

40. LiVecche, 45; and see also Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (Westminster, UK: John Knox Press, 1996).

41. LiVecche, 45.

42. LiVecche, 49–51.

43. LiVecche, 42.

and represents perfect love and perfect justice, Niebuhr simply insists one cannot love and actively pursue justice at the same time. Moreover, one certainly cannot simultaneously love and fight for justice, because one will have no choice but to act with force against wrongdoers—and per Niebuhr, love cannot permit any use of force no matter the circumstances.⁴⁴ Niebuhr’s thought thus embodies some of the same beliefs about war as pacifism and amoral realism, demonstrating how harmful these beliefs may be.

The key here is understanding how pacifism and amoral realism share conceptual space. Both ways of thinking find no value in a moral justification of the use of force for political ends. Pacifists refuse this attempt at justification because they see all use of force as immoral, and amoral realists refuse because they think the means and ends of statecraft do not require it. For both camps there is no such thing as a good war. Even wars of self-defense are not considered morally good by either camp: in a wicked world pacifists like Niebuhr render wars of self-defense as part of the wicked, and amoral realists have already excluded moral judgments from their thinking.⁴⁵

Also, significantly, both camps devalue or discount the human capacity for moral judgments. Pacifists such as Niebuhr do this because of their insistence that war requires only one universal and irrefutable moral judgment, abstracted above the historical record, that all war is always evil, thus removing the possibility of judging from circumstances. At the same time, amoral realists have divorced moral judgments from the act of war. If due to the ideas in *realpolitik* and pacifism many today believe all uses of military force are immoral, what conceptual space is left for warfighters to believe that what they are doing is morally justified? Put another way, for those tasked to keep the “wolves” at bay, how do “men and women of good will” perform this difficult task without thinking they have become wolves themselves?⁴⁶

By severing the use of military force from justice and denying constructs such as the US Air Force’s “Four Pillars” of resilience—mental, physical, social, and spiritual—*realpolitik*-style amoral realism and pacifism point to only one sentence for our military members: they are tools of the state, or worse, they are wolves.⁴⁷ Amoral realists, by treating matters of state interests as outside moral restraint, have no remorse over the sentence, as if those serving have already committed themselves to inevitable evil-doing—dirty hands is the cost of doing the business of the military. For pacifists, dirty hands come with the military uniform itself.

Occasional claims by some pacifists of the necessity of using injustice to ensure state survival are irrelevant to the military members stuck in the role of wolves during the action—by definition the participants always are acting immorally. This situation begs the questions: Is someone with the proclivity to consent to perpetual immoral behavior in any way considered healthy? And how could we ask someone to do that?

44. LiVecche, 46–48.

45. LiVecche, 44.

46. LiVecche, 64.

47. “Resilience,” Department of the Air Force, Resilience, accessed August 10, 2023, <https://www.resilience.af.mil/>.

Conclusion

Through its Four Pillars the US Air Force acknowledges each person's spiritual dimension, and not just as this relates to someone's interaction with a chaplain. One's spiritual life relates to how they understand their relationship with the world, including their moral relationship with the world. Thus, the deeper harm of amoral realism's realpolitik and pacifist ideas may be their easy rejection of this pillar entirely, as if by wearing the uniform, our military members have given up their right to a healthy spiritual life aimed at practicing moral goodness.

Put another way, the spiritual pillar of our Airmen is harmed, and likely this harm will spill over to the other three pillars—mental, emotional, and physical—when certain views of war conclude the state does not or cannot pursue justice with force. “Wolfdom” is a guarantee. And similarly, what does functionary of the state truly mean when applied to our warfighters, except a reduction to something less than human? How can therapy easily put back into one's psyche something that was taken away? Finally, to tell someone they are incapable of judgment does not remove psychological harm. It only hurts their recovery.

Here is a final ironic twist. By denying war—justly fought and aimed at justice—as a legitimate, morally sound, and enduring tool of the state, as amoral realism and pacifism do, we risk exacerbating moral injury by the implicit suggestion that our warfighters are mere state functionaries, incapable of judgment and of moral agency. They are not, and their care includes their moral welfare, even their “vindication” from any presumption that their service itself is immoral.⁴⁸

Medical and spiritual care providers and commanders did not create this predicament, but they surely face it nevertheless, and will benefit from taking it into account in their treatment and supervision. Many sources are helpful, even Clausewitz, who resisted all blanket characterizations of war as inhuman or immoral.⁴⁹ For Clausewitz, war was a distinctly human endeavor, its morality determined by how and why it is fought, and soldiers were never mere tools.

The soldier Bates in *Henry V* is a sympathetic and tragic figure. He is loyal and uncomplaining. Yet his view, or Williams' view for that matter, of war as a decision “over my head” does not eliminate moral injury but magnifies it, by pretending away war's moral dimension either through seeing all war as condemnable or as outside morality and the call of moral restraint. Warfighters deserve to retain their moral judgment appropriate to their authority and role.

The remedy starts with a clear concept of the good war, the vindication of military members as moral agents and never mere functionaries of the state, and a renewed focus on ideals such as the Air Force's Four Pillars approach. These steps, by

48. LiVecche, *Good Kill*, 5.

49. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); and see also Bart Schuurman, “Clausewitz and the ‘New Wars’ Scholars,” *Parameters* 40, no. 1 (2010).

reinvigorating our thinking on war's moral dimension, will reduce the constant pressure to reduce reality to material forces, and shield the status of our military members from the same reductive thinking. We are not and have never been simply war materiel. **Æ**

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