We use cookies to ensure that we deliver the best user experience of our website. If you would like to, you can change your cookie settings at any time. Continue

The ethics of warfare: Is it ever morally right to kill on a massive scale

Professor Heather Widdows

"War has been puzzling philosophers for centuries, and it isn't hard to see why. What could be more intuitive or ethical than the belief that it is morally wrong to kill on a massive scale?"

Read full opinion (/research/impact/perspective/ethics-of-warfare-heather-widdows.aspx)

Have your say

This debate has now closed.

Feedback

- M on 11 August 2013, **Sam** wrote

  I do not believe it is 'right' to kill in large volumes. I believe it is a very real consequence of the economic and political landscapes that can be observed in the world today.

  Often in war-like scenarios, one can observe individuals who are indifferent to the conflict being hurt by it (collateral damage). The issue of 'right' or 'wrong' often doesn't come into it. From what I can see, it is more about power when one considers what is wrong on the international stage, as what is right is determined by the more powerful country. Whereas on an individual level, I do not believe that a state has its own autonomous moral agency; I think that the actions of those involved in war must be conducive of what they believe it is to behave morally. No state of 'agency' for me is right, I think that one should do what one feels is appropriate on their own and that they must be morally responsible for it too.

  Report this comment (/webteam/bigdebate/ReportCommentsForm.aspx?commentID=5.&commentUsername=Sam&commentPageURL=/research/impact/perspective/ethics-of-warfare.aspx)

- M on 11 August 2013, **Ryan** wrote

  I don't feel that it is. I can't think of an ethical theory which would justify killing on a massive scale (with the exception of Utilitarianism in certain circumstances). Kant's moral theory could be manipulated into suggesting that it would be okay providing you considered it a duty to be killing which many would. And providing that you passed it through the first stage of his categorical imperative (Universalisation) as defending the innocent as opposed to murder. However even then it would fail to pass the other two criteria of the categorical imperative (ends not means and kingdom of ends) for by killing one person in order to protect another you have used the first person as means to an end of protecting. Also by killing any person you are removing all rights from that person and are therefore granting some people more rights than others.

  Natural law theory, while supporting both sides (to an extent) comes down firmly, i feel, on the side that says it is unethical to kill on a massive scale. Yes, by following the primary precept "live in an ordered society" you could argue that it is necessary to kill on a large scale to achieve the result. However in declaring war we are now finding that there are groups of people who are willing to demonstrate in their opposition of the war, therefore destroying any semblance of an ordered society. Not only this but it killing of any sort clearly violates the Primary precept of "preserving human life" as well as limiting the "reproduction" precept.

  In this case then I don't feel that any massive killing can be justified ethically. This DOES NOT however mean that it is not sometimes necessary. There are countless examples over the past hundred years of cases where declaring war was in fact the lesser of two evils. The declaration of war on Germany in 1939 for example was necessary in order to stop the spread of Fascism and to try and put a stop to German expansionism.

  Is it ever ethically correct? No

  Is it ever politically correct? Yes

  Report this comment (/webteam/bigdebate/ReportCommentsForm.aspx?commentID=4.&commentUsername=Ryan&commentPageURL=/research/impact/perspective/ethics-of-warfare.aspx)

- M on 08 August 2013, **Ben** wrote

  Some broad, possibly naive, questions: Does my action create a world that I should wish to live in (..if i were the weakest party vis-a-vis that action etc)? Does my action lead to a lowering of the general watermark of suffering? If it causes a temporary raising of that level and is thought to lead to a delayed reduction, how much of a decrease (relative to that increase) may be expected? Can any of this be reasonably and confidently measured or supposed? Tough questions.

  Report this comment (/webteam/bigdebate/ReportCommentsForm.aspx?commentID=3.&commentUsername=Ben&commentPageURL=/research/impact/perspective/ethics-of-warfare.aspx)

- AM on 27 July 2013, **Lianne Abrahams** wrote

It is forbidden to kill; therefore all murderers are punished unless they kill in large numbers and to the sound of trumpets.

Voltaire

Report this comment (/webteam/bigdebate/ReportCommentsForm.aspx?commentID=2. &commentUsername=Lianne Abrahams&commentPageURL=/research/impact/perspective/ethics-of-warfare.aspx)

- M on 26 July 2013, **dave roberts** wrote

What role do circumstances play in the just war criteria themselves? Some folk have argued that with the invention of nuclear weapons, a just war is no longer possible as any war would have the potential of destroying the world (thus violating discrimination and proportionality). Bush Jr's brilliant (but scary) change to this involves terrorism - Just cause to a real threat, but given the nature of terrorism the real threat can be from anywhere in the world and, as we learn about these threats through secret means, the source cannot be revealed. Which means the government can say this organisation is a threat, they are based in that country, we are attacking for the purpose of self defence. But we can't tell you how we know any of this as it would jeopardise our sources. All of which we as citizens are placed in the position of either trusting our government or not. And the question is no longer for us as citizens whether a war is just or not, but how well our government can sell the war.

Report this comment (/webteam/bigdebate/ReportCommentsForm.aspx?commentID=1. &commentUsername=dave roberts&commentPageURL=/research/impact/perspective/ethics-of-warfare.aspx)

© University of Birmingham 2014