Morality and War: Can War Be Just in the Twenty-First Century?

Joseph M. Hatfield
David Fisher

Follow this and additional works at: https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol68/iss4/17
was designed to prepare the way for the conquest of Singapore and the Dutch East Indies. FDR, aware that Japan had plans for continued expansion, simply did not see why the United States should supply Japan with the means for its southward drive. Kaiser puts it as follows: “The American embargo did not lead the Japanese to decide on a southward advance. That decision had taken place before the American freeze of Japanese assets” (258).

Kaiser’s work is a must-read for those interested in strategy, policy, and the preparation for war. Kaiser rates Roosevelt’s performance very highly. While the book lacks a bibliography, the endnotes confirm that the work rests on a thorough use of both primary and secondary sources. Those seeking to understand how Roosevelt prepared the United States for a war he viewed as inevitable will find this book insightful, delightful, and multilayered.

DOUGLAS PEIFER


David Fisher’s recent book, Morality and War, offers an account of the philosophical foundations of the just war tradition that integrates various contemporary forms of ethics into a new approach he calls “virtuous consequentialism.” He argues against moral skeptics and antifoundationalists, insisting that some account of the underpinnings of morality must be given if moral prescription is to maintain its normative force and not collapse into relativism. For Fisher, thinkers as diverse as Isaiah Berlin and Michael Walzer succumb to a false dichotomy; the impoverished moral vocabulary of the twentieth century forces them to oscillate between two extremes—an infallible totalitarianism and a groundless liberalism. In this picture, any attempt to define what is required for all humans at all times and everywhere to flourish is seen as the attempt to subjugate one’s own choices to an irrationally inerrant worldview, which in the postmodern age is criticized as feigning objectivity for the interests of prevailing power structures.

Countering this, Fisher adopts an Aristotelian approach to moral theory. Aristotle’s teleology allowed him to understand the life of virtue as both necessary for all human flourishing and pluralistic in its manifold expression. Both the athlete and the artisan might flourish as human beings just so long as they possess the virtues, even if it is understood that courage, justice, and the rest are expressed in very different ways between the two; and a soldier’s courage is the same even when comparisons are made between drastically different times and places.

Yet despite this endorsement of Aristotle, Fisher believes that no single moral theory—Aristotelian virtue ethics, utilitarianism, deontology—adequately accounts for the complexity of our contemporary moral lives. Therefore, his project combines consequentialism with virtue ethics because he sees each as having something the other requires to make sense of contemporary morality. Fisher argues that to know what the right thing to do might be in a given situation we must reflect on how our actions conduce to human flourishing but also understand our actions’ consequences. That is, virtue
theory provides but one piece of what is required and cannot fully account for the richness of our moral experience. Fisher’s hybrid approach results in a theory about war that rejects a firm distinction between the morality of the individual and that of the political community. He answers Plato’s question “why be just?” by saying that one should be just because it is in one’s self-interest. However, Fisher advocates an understanding of self-interest that goes beyond what he thinks is a post-Enlightenment preoccupation with selfish individualism and takes into account our communal nature as social animals. Justice is necessary for the proper functioning of society, and since man is fundamentally a social animal then justice is required for his own flourishing. Just as utilitarianism’s cost-benefit calculations are otiose when explaining how mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters relate to each other in families, so too, Fisher argues, for societies as a whole. Still, consequences matter; and Fisher wants to demonstrate that no theory of virtue is complete that ignores them. He thinks our communal nature enables virtue ethics and consequentialism to become united in a way that helps answer questions about justice—including justice in war. Fisher’s approach interprets the moral precepts of the just war tradition and argues not only for their adequacy but for their necessity in the contemporary moral evaluation of war. The result is an interesting and admirably lucid attempt to fill the gaps in contemporary moral theory while rendering it serviceable to the just war tradition. Morality and War is, therefore, an important contribution to a growing body of literature that attempts to make various aspects of Aristotelian ethics serviceable to normative reflections about warfare. It is no wonder that Fisher’s book won the prestigious W. J. M. MacKenzie Book Prize by the Political Studies Association in 2013.

Fisher, who died in March 2014, had a distinguished career in the British Civil Service, serving as a senior official in the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign Office, and the Cabinet Office, before taking up a post at King’s College London as a Teaching Fellow in War Studies. His ability to combine practical know-how with theoretical sophistication was a rarity, and Morality and War demonstrates this with aplomb. For example, he concludes his book by offering several practical proposals, focused mainly on the UK Ministry of Defence, that seek to help improve justice in war.

Despite these abilities, Fisher’s approach is ultimately inadequate. His rejection of a thoroughgoing Aristotelian view, one without references to modern moral theories such as utilitarianism, is motivated by important misunderstandings and misappropriation of Aristotle. While Fisher’s insistence that a reinterpretation of the just war tradition must include aspects of the recently resurgent virtue ethics approach is refreshing, his rejection of key tenets of Aristotle’s views—from the doctrine of the mean to the unity of the virtues—led Fisher to adopt modern consequentialist doctrines that sour what promised to be a thoroughly Aristotelian approach to the ethics of war. As such, many virtue ethicists would argue that Fisher’s theory offers a distasteful blending of traditions without sufficiently exhausting the resources Aristotle offered. Furthermore, Fisher’s charge that no contemporary moral theory can

https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vols68/iss4/17
adequately account for the complexity of our contemporary moral lives rests on epistemological presuppositions that take the moral speech acts of the present as an epistemic starting point rather than as resulting from historical contingency. Finally, Fisher leaves questions about the adequacy of the just war tradition in accounting for contemporary warfare largely unexamined.

JOSEPH M. HATFIELD


Stephen Emerson has written the definitive work on the war in Mozambique between Frelimo (Front for the Liberation of Mozambique) and Renamo (Mozambican National Resistance) that began in 1977 and ended with the signing of the General Peace Agreement in October of 1992. It would be an impressive effort to capture just the fight between these factions vying for control of Mozambique, then newly independent after 450 years as a Portuguese colony: Emerson goes much further. He describes the complex environment in which this struggle takes place—overshadowed by a larger Cold War and bordering countries like South Africa with its own fight over apartheid, as well as the war against white minority rule next door in Rhodesia.

Emerson traces the beginnings of Frelimo and its armed struggle against Portugal. Despite its success in gaining independence from Portugal in 1975 after over a decade of war, Frelimo struggled with postindependence nation building. Formed by opponents of the Marxist-aligned Frelimo, Renamo initially achieved operational effectiveness by obtaining arms, logistics, training, intelligence, and planning support from a Rhodesia seeking to counter Frelimo’s support of Robert Mugabe and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) forces. Mugabe’s eventual success in establishing an internationally recognized Zimbabwean state cost Renamo its major benefactor. In the 1980s, however, Renamo gained a new partner in its fight against Frelimo from the South African government of P. W. Botha looking to create instability in its “frontline states” as a way to stave off support for the African National Congress. This patronage allowed Renamo to continue its fight against Frelimo—now the ruling party of an independent Mozambique—for another thirteen years.

The conflict’s ebbs and flows affected every part of the country and its inhabitants. Between 800,000 and 1 million Mozambicans were killed in the fighting, and more than 2 million were displaced. The war’s effects included a plundering of natural resources and environmental disasters made worse by drought. An end to the Cold War and South Africa’s apartheid regime—coupled with leadership changes in Frelimo itself and all-around war exhaustion—eventually enabled peace talks and a successful settlement.

The Battle for Mozambique benefits from Emerson’s decade of research. It reflects his access to formerly classified Rhodesian military documents coupled with the firsthand accounts gleaned from hundreds of hours of interviews with both former Frelimo and former Renamo fighters as well as Rhodesian and South African military and civilian personnel. The descriptions of