

The Good Kill: Just War and Moral Injury

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BOOK REVIEWS

LEADERSHIP: THE CRITICAL STRUGGLE

The Good Kill: Just War and Moral Injury, by Marc LiVecche. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2021. 235 pages. \$74.

Marc LiVecche serves as the McDonald Distinguished Scholar of Ethics, War, and Public Life at *Providence*, the journal of the Institute on Religion and Democracy and a nonresident research fellow in the College of Leadership and Ethics at the Naval War College. In his 2021 book *The Good Kill: Just War and Moral Injury*, LiVecche clarifies what it means to use lethal force within the just-war framework and suggests that when warfighters grasp and appropriate this understanding it can help avoid unwarranted guilt and moral injury. “I want to help warfighters and those who care for them to reevaluate false beliefs about what it means to kill in war, to interrogate deeply held principles, and, where necessary, to adapt them, reinterpret them, and thereby to grow in wisdom, emotional and spiritual health, and resilience” (p. 6).

The author first critiques the oft-held and, from his perspective, falsely paradoxical societal belief, fostered notably by the late American public theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, that “killing is wrong, but in war it is necessary” (p. 39). LiVecche writes, “Niebuhr’s

insistence that it is not possible to act in history without becoming tainted with guilt is partly owed to his belief that war, because it violates the law of love, is evil” (p. 66). To counter the possible morally injurious effects of believing this paradox, the just-war tradition provides the justification that lethal force used for a just cause not only is allowed but is obligatory to thwart injustice and evil, and this use is an expression of love and justice. “In the classic understanding, the just warrior’s impetus for the use of force is imitative of a God who ordained the sword to maintain the goods of order, peace, and justice and to restrain the chaos and evil that make a hash of life where those goods are absent” (p. 106). Killing should cause the warfighter regret and sorrow for having to be in combat, but this does not equal guilt. “[E]ven when warfighters aim to kill, they ought to have some measure of regret, wishing that circumstances need not have led to the present circumstances. This regret is not guilt, nor ought it to shake their resolve” (p. 145). LiVecche refers to this posture as that of “the mournful warrior,” who very well

might experience moral *bruising* from killing but need not experience moral *injury*. He relates this understanding to a surgeon who must perform a lifesaving limb amputation: “a hard thing has to be done to prevent the advent of an even harder thing” (p. 165). In this case, the doctor is not performing a lesser of two evils (i.e., the Niebuhrian paradox) but rather the greatest *possible* good.

The author concludes by prescribing a proactive and holistic moral and spiritual preparation, to include teaching the tenets of just war, for our nation’s daughters and sons *before* they join the profession of arms (e.g., in religious faith groups and theological educational institutions), *before* they deploy to combat zones (e.g., ethical, moral, and spiritual fitness training within boot camps, officer-accession points, and unit predeployment training), and *after* they return from war (e.g., communal commitments to moral formation and servicemember and veteran care).

For those who subscribe to the just-war framework, especially within the Western, Augustinian, and Thomistic theological tradition, LiVecche’s work provides a helpful explanation of the limitations of a purely clinical model of moral injury, why and how it is just and charitable for those in the profession of arms to use lethal force in pursuit of a just cause, and how the just-war tradition might serve as a potential prophylactic against the debilitating effects of moral injury—what the author calls “damage prevention” (p. 198). For those who do not hold to a classic just-war position or who view moral injury through a predominantly medicalized lens, LiVecche’s thesis and recommended action steps likely will not resonate. However, given that the just-war tradition also traces its

roots to Roman jurists and philosophers such as Cicero, finds expression in contemporary secular thinkers such as Michael Walzer, and undergirds much of our modern-day international laws of war, LiVecche’s contribution remains beneficial in evaluating the impact of the Niebuhrian paradox on the moral foundation of those we send into harm’s way. Therefore, *The Good Kill* will benefit anyone concerned about the current moral-injury crisis, especially those responsible for training and caring for those who will fight and win our nation’s future wars.

JONATHAN ALEXANDER



Sub Culture: The Many Lives of the Submarine, by John Medhurst. London: Reaktion Books, 2022. 250 pages. \$22.50.

In his latest book, British author John Medhurst offers a comprehensive look at submarine culture from multiple perspectives. He examines life as viewed from the perspective of submariners: those who have served on submarines, beginning with experimental submersibles, propelled through the water by humans, up to the present day of modern diesel (i.e., conventional) and nuclear submarines. Yet Medhurst also views the subject from the military perspective: that of the military staffs that employ submarines as a stealth weapon (fast-attack submarines, designated SSNs) and as a doomsday weapon (ballistic-missile submarines, designated SSBNs).

But Medhurst does not stop there. He also examines submarines from a political perspective: how nations display their statuses in the world via the numbers and types of the submarines