



Utilitarianism and the Ethics of War

William H. Shaw

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The study of the ethics of war is brimming with cases taken from the realist perspective, where war among states is neither right nor wrong and is viewed outside of morality all together, and relativism perspective, where evaluating an action is done according to the ethical standards of the society within which the action occurs. Revamping the study of war is Mr. William Shaw, who approaches ethics through the lens of utilitarianism, the theory where the best action is the one that maximizes utility when considering all interests equally. *Utilitarianism and the Ethics of War* walks the reader through the theories of realism and relativism before approaching utilitarianism where the author addresses two main questions: When, if ever, are we morally justified in waging war; and, if recourse to arms is warranted, how are we permitted to fight the wars we wage? Utilitarianism, according to Shaw, holds that a state of affairs is good or bad to some gradation only in virtue of the lives of specific individuals, and second, that the good is additive.

Realists are noted in the book as having multiple views within the theory that slightly differ from one another, but tend to believe the same thing in the end: states are the central actors, the international system is anarchic, actors are rational, and all states desire power. Some realists, who are likely to be students of international relations or students of war, view that warfare is viewed outside of morality all together and there are no moral restrictions on what combatants do throughout war. Another branch of realism contends that often states habitually act amorally and that combatants often conduct war with little or no concern for the morality of their activities. Yet other realists tend to view the application of morality to war as something that can lead nations astray. Shaw uses General William T. Sherman to illustrate a portion of realism by harkening back to his quote, “War is hell,” noting how burning Atlanta, Georgia to the ground reflects these sentiments. However, Shaw continues to change the conversation and adds various ethical dilemmas to the realist by pointing out previous wars where rape, theft, and plundering were part of the prescription of the day. In the end, Shaw suggests that realists have not offered a persuasive argument that war is beyond the scope of responsibility or morality for any actor.

Relativists believe that moral concepts and principles are simply a function of what a particular society holds to be true at that point in time. Right or wrong is determined solely on what that actor or society believes to be right or wrong, not what the larger international body determines to be right or wrong. Shaw utilizes the example of the Iroquois of Quebec in the seventeenth century who viewed the torturing of captured prisoners to be acceptable; in this case relativism would suggest one cannot utilize today’s views on morality and ethics to judge against another culture, let alone a culture in a different time. Very simply, Shaw posits that if two societies have an altering view

of what is right or wrong when war is waged, then one cannot judge between the two societies, as both are right in their own eyes.

Completing the triad of broad ethical theories presented, the book finishes with utilitarianism, representing what the author views to be an old and distinguished tradition in moral philosophy. First, utilitarianism notes that the outcomes of our actions are the key to moral evaluation, and second, one should assess and compare those outcomes in terms of their bearing on welfare. Utilitarianism partially utilizes the term consequentialism and philosophers utilize the term when viewing actions through the lens of right or wrong. Specifically, an actor's actions are viewed as right or wrong depending on the consequences, or outcomes, of the action. Also, the action can be viewed as right if no other course of action could have yielded an outcome of a better result. Utilitarianism also makes use of the concept of welfarism, where happiness or well-being is to be the only good in itself. In other words, the welfare of a society is all that matters. Utilitarianism uses the condition where an act is right, if and only if, no other action accessible to the actor has a greater probability for well-being of the society; otherwise, it is wrong and immoral.

Utilitarianism and the Ethics of War fully encompasses each viewpoint that could be of influence on the field of battle, but could use additional insight and thought beyond what is already written for the military officer. Shaw writes through each perspective of war from combatants and non-combatants, covering more towards the lens of being a military officer in his concluding thoughts by stating, "War obliges commanders to order troops into combat, often in circumstance that guarantee that at least some of them will perish." Although some, if not most, will argue this is true, combat in today's environment involves many more individuals on the battlefield than military entities or those that work under military authority. Shaw fully agrees that there is additional discussion on this view, noting in his conclusion that he hopes this book has opened the door to continue discussions on ethics employing the utilitarian viewpoint.

Overall, *Utilitarianism and the Ethics of War* attempts to answer that if morality applies to all domains of the human struggle, why should war be the exception? Individuals may try and state this is another version or variant of just war theory, but Shaw notes he would consider utilitarianism a species of just war theory if one considers it to subsume all non-pacifist discourse. However, if one views just war theory in a free-standing normative context, then utilitarianism is a rival to it. Shaw concludes the advantage of using the utilitarianism approach to ethics on war is that it allows the theorist to "sidestep many insoluble disputes" that philosophers have when discussing ethics and war.

This book should be considered required reading by the military professional. Today, our military faces several facets of the ethics argument, coming from multiple viewpoints. In order to understand these issues better, one should be well versed in the various theories surrounding this topic and the application of ethics to war. This book adds to the professional discourse already underway across training and education environments, as well as in numerous journals and books consistently being published on this topic. **IAJ**