CHAPTER 10

Ethics of War as a Part of Military Ethics

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Military Ethics and Ethics of War

The Ethics of war are a part of military ethics, and military ethics are a part of political ethics. Although war has its own specific logic both in terms of its existence and its functioning the matter in the end is political: what is the political purpose of war, or what is the prerequisite of it. This prerequisite is the armed forces. It is true that armed forces have many different, often multifunctional, tasks and duties, but the main purpose of them is what makes the meaning and value of war, and that is the peace, the end state characterized by stability and predictability (the main job of an army is either to wage a war or to prepare for it). War is, by definition, a temporary state of affairs aimed to its end, which is a (new) peace. If this is so then the purpose of armed forces is not to be used but actually quite the opposite: not to be used, if possible. Its primary purpose is to avert a possible attack. That clearly establishes defence as the utmost and possibly only justification of war. The final mission of armed forces is to prevent war if possible, and only if necessary to engage if waging a war.

From this viewpoint military ethics covers a broader terrain than ethics of war. But what’s ‘ethical’ there in the first place? On one side we have a belief that in war, like in business, ‘everything is allowed’. This standpoint of amoral-ity of war is very comfortable for warriors as it absolves them (and us, if we accept this standpoint) from the difficult analysing of complex issues that might seem hard to solve. This standpoint, however, is widespread as a kind of broadly accepted prejudice. It has a clear benefit of safeguarding all those engaged in a war from a too big burden of responsibility and often of the conflict of responsibilities. On the other side there is a strong attitude to assess war exclusively in terms of its badness as necessary something always and necessary “evil”. If there is a possible justification for war it should be somewhere in between these opposite standpoints. This might produce the impression that justifying war is a hopeless task, or something utterly contradictory: impossible despite being necessary.

On the other side the theoretical justification seems to be at odds with what we find on the phenomenological level as the reality of war, as the real experience of many of those affected by it. There are many possibilities how this experience might be established and articulated. Those who make decisions,
and many of those who fight, may take their standpoint to express what they believe in and are ready to sacrifice for, by saying that the cause of the war is ‘their own’. The readiness to fight for one’s own cause is a paradigmatic form of defence. The conflict then is presumably a conflict of adverse political interests, where victory is being a substantive achievement (national freedom or even survival), and defeat is a significant loss. This is the standard political approach to war. However, there are other possibilities to interpret the case of having a ‘cause of their own’: it might be a deep belief of duty to defend what’s perceived worth to be defended independently of whose interests are invested in that cause. In that case we are ready to fight for our ideals, which might incorporate more interests of others than of ourselves, implying our readiness to sacrifice for those ideals. Which ideals? They might be very different. Usually those are religious beliefs, or ideological schemes. Here we have an eschatological approach to war, frequently present not only in justifying the participation in wars but also in perceiving some wars as the fight for ‘final’ victory of ‘good’ over ‘evil’, as a ‘war against the war itself’. There are still other possibilities on the level of phenomenology of experience. Many are going to war for reasons to experience pastime, or adventure, or to fight off boredom or the feeling of the absurdity of life. Some take war to be a kind of ceremony, something glorious. These borderline cases, exceptional or not, are of less interest to us in depicting the phenomenology of war.

However, there is one form of experiencing war that is, in my opinion, of special interest. For many a job is just another unfortunate accident, another limit and setback in their life, short and miserable as it can be. This, what I would like to call it, third approach to war (besides political and eschatological) we may call cataclysmic. According to this approach war is something that happens to us, as individuals or nations, and is catastrophic in its final meaning, similar to natural disasters. It seems to me that this aspect of war, although a grand theme in literature, is rather neglected in philosophical, and also ethical, elaboration of the phenomenology of war. The standard situation ‘he or me’, experienced by warriors in the middle of the battle belongs also here. However, some of the basic features of war, unpredictability of its outcome and irreversibility of its main course, corroborate this approach to war: war is a kind of disaster for many, or most, of those who participate in it. Jumping to the conclusion in a way, I would say that this approach indicates one of the most important features of war, a feature of the utmost ethical significance – the lack of any feasible, or even plausible, control of future time (at least for those inside the frame of it). This lack of control of our future is actually the absence of what makes life normal: predictability, existence of real and valid rules of life, the laws and customs which make our life plans realizable in the rather short time