

What is Really the Question?  
What Does it Mean to Ask Whether  
Strategy or Tactics are "Amoral"?

Joint Services Conference on Professional Ethics

NDU 9 January 1986

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This is not going to be a long or complex paper. It seeks only to clarify one basic question of logic and language. Yet that question arises in more than one context. The same form of words can be used by different people to make different, even contrary points.

My interest is by no means that of a professional philosopher, nor even that of someone teaching the elements of philosophy in a college level curriculum, as numerous conference participants do. I could say that my interest in the tools of philosophy is "pastoral," in that people need help to make sense of their decisions. Or it is "political," in the sense of wanting to be able to participate responsibly in the decisions of the civil community. Or it is "parliamentary"; before we can have a debate we need to establish some commonality of language.

The task undertaken here is therefore that of prior clarification of language in the service of ethical clarity, civility, and democracy. A prerequisite of respectful debate is that we distinguish the path from its end, the language which is the instrument of our conversation from the agreement or decision which we hope will issue. Even when we disagree--especially when we disagree--on important matters of substance, we must work at agreeing about what it is we are talking about and what rules and logic will help us to talk about it. It is a prerequisite of ethical discourse to be able to distinguish the rules which make a process of discourse understandable and accountable from the ultimate conclusions which a given party in that discourse believes it ought ultimately to attain. We should learn to talk the same language independently of our judgments upon the merit of the other person, the merit of the other person's case, or the ultimate truth of the matter.

My contribution to the discussion here about whether matters of strategy can ever be amoral is not to proceed with an argument for either a "yes" or a

"no" answer to that question, but to disentangle the different meanings the different answers might have, and the reasons people might be subject to misunderstanding when using that language.

Most of the time our public discourse is clouded by the fact that immediate biases so polarize a discussion that conversation is barely civil, and most of the time people talk past one another. This has been largely the case with regard to Vietnam. It is still largely the case with regard to the nuclear arms race, and the prospects for development and deployment of bacteriological and chemical weapons. Clarifying the debate's shape can thus better be served by taking our guidance from some historical distance, such as now begins to obtain with regard to obliteration bombing of cities in World War II.

The recent death of General Arthur "Bomber" Harris gave one occasion to review the debate which raged within British society (strikingly much more openly than in the US) and which to some extent was carried on also between the American and the British air forces with regard to the legality, the morality, and the cost benefit wisdom of city bombing.

Likewise the 40th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki has renewed our attention to the dimensions of that massive annihilation, which has much in common with the fire bombing of Hamburg or Dresden or Tokyo, but which in other psychologically important ways brought us into a new epoch.

I do not intend to review here the discussion of either the larger question of the massive bombing of urban populations in WWII or the narrower one of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki decisions. I indicate only that it is in the current experience of reviewing those events, as it is now being done by survivors and later generations, that we see our societies working through the

debate about their moral components. It is in reviewing such cases that we find some people asserting that it is wrong to try to make moral decisions about them.

To argue that matters of strategy and tactics are "amoral" is not a meaningful statement unless the terms are defined. Since "amoral" is a composite word, formed with a privative prefix, we need to know first what "moral" means. There is however another composite with another negative prefix, namely "immoral." Unpacking the different kinds of negation may point us to different kinds of affirmation. Sometimes when we say that a matter is a moral matter we mean that it is in a realm concerning which it is appropriate that ethical decisions should be made. The entire question is a moral question, independent of what the right answer might be. Then "amoral" represents a realm or a subject matter concerning which the language of morality is inappropriate, because there are no decisions to be made or the decisions to be made are not of an ethical nature.

The other meaning of "moral" is the opposite of "immoral"; the moral thing to do is the right thing to do, and the immoral choice is the wrong choice.

This variety of realms of discourse is not necessarily confused, but it is appropriate that we should recognize it as at least potentially confusing. Terms have multiple meanings and need first to be sorted out. Until we have done that sorting, neither a "yes" or a "no" to the broad question will be of much help.

The standard meaning of the term, "amoral," whose first use the Oxford English Dictionary dates as of 1882, is

"not within the sphere of moral sense: not to be characterized as good or bad: non-moral."

So the adjective "a-moral" describes a realm, or a question, concerning which moral questions are not appropriate. Not that they cannot be answered: they cannot properly be asked.

Questions can be asked which use moral-sounding language, verbs like "should" and verbs in the imperative mode. Yet the imperatives are instrumental: you should pay your bills on time if you don't want to pay interest on the balance. You should not get caught breaking the rules, if you want to avoid punishment...You should not eat peas with a knife...You should not split your infinitives...You should speak more clearly...These uses of moral-sounding language are based in etiquette, taste, convention, or practicality. These realms may have moral implications but they are not at their center properly moral issues. I take note <sup>parenthetically</sup> of one quirk of language

usage, which I have observed in the realm of fiction and literary criticism. It is not yet in the dictionaries. I allude to it as a component of our background language awareness, though it does not relate directly to our topic. For a person to be described as "amoral" is not neutral but negative. It means that that person lacks a moral sensitivity which he/she ought to have.

The properly academic ideal way to proceed with such an investigation would be to gather a large number of statements, as contemporary as possible, where the notion of "amorality" occurs, seeking to interpret them in context and if necessary to classify their differences, as to know just what is meant each time. For three reasons we have to renounce such an enterprise. The fact that the bulk of the study would be prohibitive for the scope of this paper is not the basic reason. A second is that many of the utterances we should need to deal with would be occasional, unself-critical, philosophically amateur, not so phrased as to submit easily to careful analysis. A third,

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more complex, is the paradox involved in the psychological side of warfare. When President Richard Nixon reportedly told Secretary Kissinger that he wanted the nation's Asian adversaries to perceive him as a wild man, or when John Arbuthnot Fischer, the legendary Admiral who dominated British naval policy at the turn of the century, predicated Britannia's rule of the waves on the readiness to fight with utter disregard of the rules of war, they were projecting for public perception a posture which was not the same as the operational ethos of their fighting forces. ~~We~~ shall therefore have to shortcut the statement of the problem by stipulating that the thesis we are to question is widespread, itemizing only a few of the most evident places where it surfaces:

- a) Hugo Grotius, generally counted symbolically as the father of the modern notion of international law, begins his Laws of War with allusions to the challenges of others, ever since the cynics of ancient Greece, who claim that once war has broken out there can be no law at all;
- b) Robert W. Tucker, eminent political scientist, demonstrates from the American record that there seems to exist a specific American variant of the Just War Tradition (JWT) in both law and morals. According to Tucker, ~~America~~ <sup>the U.S.</sup> is especially reticent to enter hostilities; the limits of jus ad bellum are respected with conscientiousness and caution. The guys in the white hats never shoot first. Yet once hostilities have begun, the tendency, says Tucker, is to be impatient with the restraints on its prosecution.<sup>1</sup>
- c) Michael Walzer, in his landmark work Just and Unjust Wars,<sup>2</sup> identifies as his major adversary the view he calls "realistic," which denies any firm final restraints.

The difference between declared and operational policies complicates things enormously.

d) General Kermit D. Johnson, former U.S. Army Chief of Chaplains, speaking at the National Defense University in August, 1985, began by identifying the claim that "ethics never won a battle."<sup>3</sup> Within this context he noted the special challenge of officers who believed that their superiors were the ones without ethical sensitivities. The moral erosion Johnson denounces is not limited to the ethics of battle, but includes that.

Some of the adversaries named in these texts are philosophical types claiming only to be honest with the dismal facts of experience. Some are persons with command decision authority, wanting their elbows free to do their job. What they have in common is what the title term "amorality" represents; the denial that moral rules can apply in armed combat.

The case against effective moral discrimination can be made on different levels of severity. The strongest, sometimes called "nihilism," denies that moral standards have any ultimate meaning at all. The nihilist cannot deny that people do in fact use moral language and take it seriously, but he can argue that its usage is self-deceptive or hypocritical, since moral categories are reducible to statements of interest, desire, or taste. (5)

Less rigorous is the moral "relativist," who affirms that moral standards really exist, are definable, and lay real claims upon us, but who denies that the substance of those claims can be firmly specified, in important conflictual situations, in a way that will be accepted by all parties concerned, since every definition is dependent on time, place, culture, religion, interest, etc....

Still less rigorous, but still strong enough for the purposes of the present discussion, is the "realistic" view (thus characterized by Hans Morgenthau, who used the term affirmatively, and by Michael Walzer, who uses

it to name what he rejects). The "realist" does not deny that the standards exist and may be specified. Yet he knows that they are not respected and will not be. Since others do not respect them, we cannot afford to do so either. In fact, if I bear any responsibility for defending the legitimate interests of a specific political community, it would be wrong to respect all the other moral standards at the cost of our community's interests.

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To be clear about what is going on when some people do deny that there is a moral component in decisions made about strategy and tactics, it will be helpful to define the affirmative position, which they deny. The affirmative alternative is a logical continuation of the just war tradition, most clearly taught by theologians since the early middle ages. We will do well to distinguish this possible morally coherent position from the five other typological alternatives which are alive in contemporary thought. In trying to describe and name these options I am discovering nothing, making no unprecedented observations, making no argument but only classifying the conceptual reality that we all deal with. It is important to name those alternatives, since it is they which lie behind the thesis that moral considerations do not count.

- 1) There is the "Holy War" tradition represented by the Christian crusades, by the wars of JHWH in the age of Moses, Joshua, and the Judges, by the Muslim DJIHAD, and by certain kinds of ideological rhetoric in favor of socialist or fascist visions. Here violence is justified by the authority of an absolute value in the face of which the enemy has no rights and our victory is assured.
- 2) There is the simple affirmation that the exercise of power is a rule unto itself. Some of this was present in the ancient cynics. It was developed into a full blown philosophy by Machiavelli. I already



named it above as the strong form of the thesis we are discussing. Michael Walzer in his landmark treatment on Just and Unjust Wars calls it "realism."

- 3) There is a kind of mythic macho heroism, represented by the images of John Wayne or Rambo, deeply rooted in earlier cultural experiences, whether islamic, iberic, or teutonic, where the power and the courage of the heroic figure are themselves an ultimate moral validation. Sometimes it is claimed or assumed that what the hero does is right by the law, but there is no due process of law to verify that or to defend the rights of the innocent bystanders or of his adversaries. Sometimes it is claimed that God is behind him. In that case it becomes a variant of the Holy War tradition, but such a "God" tends to have few other functions than to empower the hero. I have spoken of individual hero figures because they most simply incarnate the macho mythos, but obviously it is also possible to find this kind of rejection of moral standards incarnated as well in a particular military unit or a particular ruling elite.
- 4) There is a specific variant of the Just War tradition which I have named and analyzed in a separate study.<sup>4</sup> It is like the Just War tradition in that it is not unconcerned for moral values. It is unlike the tradition in that it reduces moral evaluation to a promise of effectiveness. It is ready to use disproportionate and indiscriminate means, either as a threat in the case of the contemporary vision of mutual assured destruction, or in actual implementation, as in the bombing strategy of RAF General Arthur Harris, on the grounds that if it works it will bring victory most quickly, and cheaply which will be best for all concerned, even the

losers, rather than having the hostilities dragged out by being too ticklish about keeping the rules. This is in one sense still a moral position. Yet it has reduced all morality to consequential calculations, linked with a high level of trust in the accuracy of one's own predictions and projections of how things will go if we continue to follow a particular strategy or tactic.

- 5) The meaning of the logic of the Just War tradition properly so called can be somewhat clarified when contrasted with these other views, which are also ~~interested in~~ <sup>concerned about</sup> morale and morality in human values, but in more simple ways that are less capable of exercising ~~critique~~ <sup>moral</sup> restraint. <sup>critical</sup>

The Just War tradition defends the values of the adversary by defining numerous criteria which need to be met if the selfish desires of a given nation are to have the right to claim legitimacy for any military undertaking against that adversary. One set of criteria regulate the right to go to war at all, what we call jus ad bellum. The second set, elaborated later in European history, limit the means which are legitimate, even in a just cause being prosecuted by a legitimate authority in a situation of last resort. "Strategy and tactics" fall in this latter category of jus in bello. The means must be necessary, proportionate, discriminating, must respect the immunity of the noncombatant, the laws and conventions of war.... Thus the claim that "strategy and tactics are amoral" would at the least mean the rejection of jus in bello.

- 6) The only other logically possible position, pacifism, is not a part of this discussion at all, except that it shares with the Just War tradition the commitment to the rights and dignity of the adversary, and to the principle of restraint as such. <sup>(6)</sup>

If we now ask which of the above stances can speak of strategic and tactical matters as "amoral," it is obvious that it can be used only in favor of attitudes (2) or (3) above, since only they have a stake in denying that moral considerations count. <sup>even</sup> Yet they do make (some) moral claims. It is an error or even a falsehood, they say, to try to apply (usual) moral yardsticks to matters of strategy or tactics. But then that means that they are actually making (without admitting it) two moral arguments:

- a) The specific goals for the sake of which one carries on a war do justify whatever one wants to do towards those ends. One's own values transcend all the moral claims of the other parties to the conflict.
- b) One should describe military phenomena in terms which do not take account of moral dimensions.

Those are moral arguments. They represent the specific moral view which is technically, objectively called egoistic or cynical, according to which one's own values so clearly come first that the claims of others have no standing.

It seems clear then, from looking closer at the variety of concrete meanings behind the verbal usages, that when people speak of the absence of a moral dimension within the execution of war, what they mean is not that there is no moral dimension at all. If that were really the intention, they would have to be saying that war is something whose happening is subject to no criteria at all. That would mean the claim that it can be and should be incalculable and spontaneous. If that were the case neither the word "strategy" nor the word "tactics" would be at all appropriate.

Readiness for war is a highly structured institutional investment supported by an entire society. Its execution is highly organized, except in the case of rout, and even then only on the losing side. The dimensions of

confusion and incoherency within a military operation which have been rendered legendary by literature like Catch 22 have been the result of organization that was excessive and inappropriate, not of spontaneity.

Certainly the most respectable case for the irrelevance of moral criteria, we saw, is what has been called "realism." It has regularly been brought to the fore over against those who call for wars to be fought by the rules. But what is really going on in "realism" is not the denial of any morality, ~~but~~ <sup>it</sup> is rather the affirmation of an unquestioned specific moral commitment according to which the interests of one party to the conflict, as interpreted by one set of leaders, takes precedence over the claims of others. That superior value will often be expressed by saying that our very survival is at stake, or that in our survival all of the values of civilization are at stake. That language is an escalated form of the true statement that the present administration's control of a particular political structure is at stake. Forty years after the end of War War II, Germany, defeated in a war demanding unconditional surrender, is still alive and well in the form of three relatively sovereign nations carved out of the rest of Hitler's Reich. In all three of them, people speaking German and cultivating German culture are ruled over by their own kind. One of them, called a Federal Republic, is bound by treaties and commerce to the United States, one to the Soviet Union, and Austria is formally neutral: in no case did defeat mean that the nation or its people or culture went out of existence.

There may be racist or ideological conflicts in which the elimination of the enemy people or culture is actually intended, but this is not typical of war. It is usually not even the case where the rhetoric about all of civilization being at stake is used. What usually happens after losing a war is the establishment of another government structure, supported by a minority

of the people of that country, as the previous one had been. This ruling minority claims to be heir to that nation's traditions, as the previous one had been, operating the same railroads, subways, hospitals and telephone services. What the war was about was the choice of who should determine which minority would have the positions of managerial prominence, and which network of foreign alliances the country would affirm allegiance to. Those matters are very important. They are morally important. They are not however so infinitely important that they transcend other moral claims. ~~absolutely all~~

By no means am I saying that nothing at all is at stake in a war. Certainly the choice between two different alliance systems or two different commercial networks is important. What I am saying is that those values are not infinite or absolute. To speak of them in terms of the absolute survival of a nation or of a civilization is to prevaricate, as is done when the claim to an absolute stake is used to justify suspending the obligations of the laws of war.

It is worthy of note that when people begin to argue against the applicability of the rule of law in a given case, this generally permits them to be sloppy about the facts of the case in more than one direction. Michael Walzer argues the appropriateness of the massive bombing of German cities on the grounds that all of western civilization was at stake in the battle with Hitler. Yet he did not demonstrate either that Hitler and his generals at that time had any serious expectation of an imminent successful invasion of Great Britain, or that the massive bombing of German cities would have a sure efficacy in slowing down the Nazi war effort. Both of those unproven assumptions have since been strongly challenged by historians.

It results from our examination of the horizon that although it may well be meaningful in some circumstances to speak of one realm of decision making

as not being characterized by any moral dimensions, this certainly cannot be said of war or of any of the component elements within it. War is a highly structured and costly human activity. It is not undertaken without strong conviction that the values which it risks and destroys: lives, property, and the survival of institutions, should properly thus be risked and if necessary be destroyed. What then someone means, in saying that a given realm is "amoral," is that the person, or the other persons he or she would tend to be describing, prefer not to recognize this moral dimension, not to name the values that are being held superior to other values, so as not to undergo moral scrutiny. They may not wish to avow that the values for which they sacrifice other values may be those of selfish interest or of ideological partisanship. They may not want to recognize that, in some of their relative judgments of what is worth killing and dying for, they are giving very high value to imponderables like the honor of the Corps or the secrecy of a code, as weighed over against the value of human lives or the rule of law.

It results from our examination of the horizon that although it may well be meaningful in some circumstances to speak of one realm of decision making as not characterized by any moral dimensions, this certainly cannot be said of war, or of any of the component elements within it. War is a highly structured and costly human activity which is not undertaken without strong conviction that the values which it risks and threatens are less valuable than those one hopes to protect or to gain.

The language of "amorality" is a semantic error, often committed innocently. It signals the priority of some value or interest of one's own over the claims of the adversary or the innocent. The morality which it (mistakenly) disavows would (rightly) defend the other party's claims. Moral accountability on the other hand would accept testing one's own claims by the standard criteria of legitimacy, cause,

intention, last resort, proportion, innocent immunity, respect for treaties and all the rest. To do that testing, one must name those values, not cover them with the claim that they are somehow exempt from moral accountability.

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Robert W. Tucker, The Just War: A Study in Contemporary American Doctrine. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1960.

<sup>2</sup>Michael Walzer, Just and Unjust Wars, New York, Basic Books, 1977, especially pp. 3-20.

<sup>3</sup>Kermit D. Johnson, "Military Ethics," Military Chaplains' Review, Vol. 14, No. 5, Summer 1985, pp. 5-16.

<sup>4</sup>J. Yoder, "A Consistent Alternative View Within the Just War Family," Faith and Philosophy, Vol. 2, No. 2, April 1985, pp. 112-120.

5) Elsewhere (Nevertheless: The Varieties of Religious Pacifism, Scottdale PA, Herald Press, 1971) I have distinguished numerous moral stances covered by the term "pacifist". All but two of them would <sup>fit</sup> ~~fit~~ the above description, but otherwise they range widely, from withdrawn Tolstoyan "nonresistance" to the aggressive "soul force" of Gandhi. They would however stand together for purposes of the present exposition.

6) Richard A. Wasserstrom ("The Morality of War" in his collection War and  
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Morality, Belmont CA, Wadsworth, 1970, p. 79, also in Malham M. Wakin, (ed.), War, Morality, and the Military Profession, Boulder CO, Westview, 1979, p. 301) distinguishes three modes of nihilist or realist argument: descriptive, prescriptive, and analytical. The "prescriptive" mode is the one most pertinent to the present discussion. Yet the argument often slides from one to the other; from the descriptive observation that people do act "unrealistically" to the claim ("prescriptive") that it is right that they should do so or ("analytic") that it is meaningless to contemplate anything else.