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Military Tactics, Military Strategy and Morality

On the face of it, it would seem that in doing his work, a military tactician or strategist would be acting neither morally nor immorally, but rather non-morally.¹ Developing a strategy or some tactic is, after all, a form of planning. As against the strategies and tactics of dealing with poverty and illness, it is true that the strategies or tactics of war tend to get many people killed and maimed. But strategical and tactical planning, it could be argued, are simply matters of gathering information, and using logic and imagination to decide what to do in the future and, insofar as they are, they would seem to be non-moral. Another way this might be put is that these activities are morally neutral. After all, planning is something that can not only be done both during war and before it starts, but also by both the "good" and the "bad" side during a war.

In this connection, contrast the rather neutral-sounding words 'strategy' and 'tactics,' as well as 'plan,' 'policy,' 'proposal' and 'design' with the following concepts. Think here of a scheme or the activity of scheming! Think also of a plot or plotting! Or how about engaging in intrigue or a conspiracy? Each of the latter concepts carries a defeasible negative connotation. Thus although we normally would suppose that a scheme, a plot or a conspiracy is a bit shady or shoddy morally, it is not logically inconceivable to suppose that there are morally good schemes, plots or conspiracies. A plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler in 1944, for example, would be thought by most of us to be morally worthy of support. Still, the negative connotation is undeniably there for all these concepts.

Instead of having such negative connotations, the concepts of strategy and tactics might, if anything, lean in the other direction. They might not quite be neutral since, especially in their dispositional senses, they seem actually to have a positive connotation. It is true that these expressions when used without any modifying expressions are primarily descriptive in nature. That is why it makes sense to think of them as morally neutral. Still, to call someone a strategist or a tactician is to credit that person with certain skills that not everyone possesses. So to that extent we are not merely describing but mildly commending a person by calling him a strategist or tactician. Indeed, if the commendatory sense of these expressions is not strong enough, we can say that he is a good (or possibly a real) strategist or tactician. Notice, to return for a moment to the negative sounding terms, how it sounds more strained to talk of someone as a good schemer, plotter or conniver!

But if, as I now seem to be suggesting, strategists and tacticians can be praised either by simply being labelled as such or by being labelled good at what they do, is that not to imply that these terms are not morally neutral after all? Not necessarily. When we praise someone as a good tactician we can be praising him for being good at doing certain tasks conceived of very narrowly. Imagine here two excellent military tacticians. One is fighting on the side of the Allies in World War II and the other on the German side. Imagine to boot that the German is a dyed-in-the-wool Nazi. Is the latter less of a tactician because he has immoral views and is fighting for an immoral political ideology? The praise we give him and the Allied tactician can be for the battle skills they possess quite apart from the morality

of the overall positions they hold. Thus, we can, if we know that the Nazi is a truly excellent tactician, learn much about tactics by reading his works and following his moves on the battlefield. To the extent that we can do this sort of analysis, we can say that tactical moves, even when well done, are morally neutral (i.e., are non-moral activities or virtues).

However that is not the end of the story. That it is possible for certain purposes to separate the concept of tactics and perhaps even strategy from morality does not mean that they can always be so separated. We can see how this is so by focusing first upon the concept of tactic(s). Part of the meaning of that term has to do with arranging things. The tactician puts and moves his personnel and equipment in a certain order in the face of the enemy presumably in order to disable him. In contrast to strategic goals, tactical ones are usually thought of as short-ranged. One of many reasons tactics can so easily be thought to be morally neutral is that most short-ranged goals during a war are taken for granted morally. During the war, one is supposed to be able to attack bridges over which the enemy moves and to attack his tanks in the valley below. It is possible then to view the tactician as a person playing a kind of game where we can watch and assess his moves as if they have no moral significance. But when we do this, we tend to forget that in drawing this non-moral portrait of tactics that even in a purely military setting, such as where ships are fighting at sea or where fighter planes are dueling in the sky, the tactician has duties to his own people.² If his tactics cause unnecessary casualties among them, he is subject to moral (and military) criticism. Presumably it is conceivable that there are

tactical options both of which will get the job at hand done in the same time and with the same number of casualties, and yet one option is more imaginative and therefore more admired by the tactician's peers than the other. The moral difference between these tactical options could then be said to be zero. But most tactical options will carry with them different costs in personnel and supplies and, insofar as they do, they will unavoidably be liable to moral assessment.

The point being made here has nothing to do with the distinction between the result of a tactical move and the planned result. In one sense we hold the tactician, actually any actor on any moral stage, as responsible for what happens. But we know, especially in war, where the unanticipated (one is tempted to say the unanticipatable) happens, that we cannot hold the tactician strictly accountable for what actually happens. Nonetheless, to the extent that we can assess tactical plans either in retrospect or in anticipation of the results they will bring, the tactician and his moves are morally assessable for no other reason than he cannot help but put the lives of many of his own people at risk in doing his work.

There is another reason why military tactics can be seen as having moral import. As I noted above, some tactical moves are made in settings where the tactical arrangements are solely between two military forces. Unfortunately, as we all know, not all settings are of this sort. Many will be of the kind where civilians will be getting in the way of the battle. Knowing this to be so, if the tactician designs his moves so as to take advantage of the civilian presence, those tactics will intrinsically be immoral. Thus if the tactician deliberately moves his people where large groups of civilians are

found, knowing full well that by doing so the enemy will hesitate before making its next move (and thereby lose the initiative), we can hardly call such a move morally neutral---no matter how clever it might be. The point here is that the tactic in such a setting cannot be characterized without making reference to how the civilians were used. And if that is the case, and if further there is a rule against using civilians in ways that puts them in jeopardy, then we have at least a presumptive case for condemning this tactic as immoral. Much the same point applies to the tactician's moves if they disable the enemy in a manner far out of proportion to need. Thus if the tactics devised are such as to not even allow the enemy the opportunity to surrender if he should wish to do so, then again the presumption is that the tactics are immoral.

The issues surrounding strategy, most especially grand strategy, are more complicated. Strategy, of course, has to do with longer-ranged goals than tactics. Although the distinction between tactics and strategy is not devoid of vagueness, it is clear that strategy is concerned with arrangements not just of the fighting forces (usually prior to battle) but of all the resources that these forces might need in battle. Whatever the precise meaning of strategy, there is no doubt that it is subject to the same analysis I have given to tactics. If different strategies lead (or are expected to lead) to different levels of casualties on the strategist's side of the war, then insofar as such casualties could have been anticipated, the strategist is accountable both morally and militarily. In the same vein, if an intrinsic part of the strategy involves the use of the military in ways that violate moral rules having to do with how wars are fought (e.g., by aiming

first at civilian populations or needlessly slaughtering enemy soldiers), then a prima facie case for saying that the strategy is immoral can be made.

However, what makes strategy more complicated than tactics and, in the end, makes it additionally liable to be judged on moral grounds is that the goals usually taken for granted in assessing tactics are not taken for granted in strategy. Strategy may not only set the framework for tactics that might be used in fighting the war (e.g., as it would if the tactics adopted by field commanders had to be largely defensive in nature because the overall strategic policy were one of containment), but may even set the goals. The goals of winning a certain kind of war may be set because part of the strategy might be that the war must start with a surprise attack. Further strategy may dictate when the war is to end, that is, what is to count as victory. The standard of victory set by the Japanese in World War II, for example, was "a standoff," since such a result would have allowed them to do what they wished with large portions of Asia. U.S. strategy was different because, in part, its goals were different. It was in no mood to declare the war won just because it recaptured some of the lands that the Japanese had occupied during the first year of that war.

To be sure, like different tactical schemes, different strategies could result in no morally significant differences. Two different strategies could result in the same kind of victory with roughly the same casualties within roughly the same time span. In such cases, we would say that there was no moral (and military) difference between them. But, again, different strategies will more than likely yield

different results and, insofar as they do, they will be judgeable morally.

There are several obvious objections to saying that military tacticians and strategists are assessable morally as well as militarily. I will deal with four of them. The first is that, in fact, we do not seem to be quick to morally condemn generals and admirals because their casualty rates are higher than others in comparable command positions, or because they have been defeated in battle. Often, the objection continues, we take their command away from these officers but, in the process, we do not condemn them in moral terms. This suggests that strategists and tacticians are not playing the moral game when they are doing their work.

There is something right about this objection. We are indeed slow to morally condemn those who bring us high casualty rates or who have absorbed a defeat or two. In fact we are downright tolerant in these matters and that makes it appear that morality is not involved here at all. But the toleration we practice should not mislead us. We hold back from morally condemning tacticians and strategists because we realize that military judgments are difficult to make, to say the least. We know that even good military leaders will miscalculate in this dangerous business. But notice that there is a limit to our tolerance. Should the leader miscalculate so grossly that his side takes enormous casualties, we do not spare him any longer from moral criticism. We call him irresponsible, callous, criminal and immoral just because it is his duty to look after his people in a way that does not lead to such casualties. Our reluctance to quickly condemn mistakes, then, does not mean that we are not thinking in moral terms

in these settings, but merely that we hesitate in applying these terms to those in charge when we are not sure that we would have done a better job in that situation. It is as if we withhold the highest of all form of criticism we can level at a person, that is, moral criticism, until we are more certain of culpability.

There is another reason we hesitate to morally condemn a strategist or tactician when things go wrong. The paradigm case when we morally condemn another person is when he intends to do wrong. If the tactician defeated in battle turns out to be working for the enemy, moral (and other forms of) condemnation are quickly expressed. There is no tolerance under such circumstances. But the vast majority of tacticians and strategists do not intentionally bring about high casualties and defeats upon their own side. Rather, these unfortunate results come about in spite of their efforts to avoid them. They may be careless, overworked, mentally inflexible or just plain not so intelligent as their enemy counterparts. Whatever the case, the fact that they did not do an intentional wrong is (pace Kant) not enough to remove the wrongs that occurred from the realm of morality. Again we may not publically and morally condemn the wrong doer for the reasons I have cited, but that too does not mean that the failed tactician or strategist is not engaged in working within the moral realm.

With the second objection the opponent grants that moral responsibility does apply to these concepts when both sides are shooting at each other, but denies such application during peacetime. To plan strategy and tactics during peacetime is a different matter from doing it during war. With the former, so the argument might go, the main

consequences of our planning is a waste of paper and time. During war the waste is of lives.

This is really not a serious objection. Of course, developing strategy and tactics that are never applied during wartime costs no lives. And, of course, since such plans are "wasted" it seems as if peacetime military strategy and tactics have about as much to do with morality as do strategy and tactics in baseball and football. But even so-called wasted plans might have had an impact on the military scene. Much like a health-care insurance policy that was never needed, they certainly might have been needed and, in that sense, they quite properly should be in place. Further, developed strategies and tactics are not just pieces of paper in the hands of the generals and admirals. Beyond that they are manifested in the deployment of personnel with certain kinds of equipment in certain places. And that deployment can, and often does, have an impact upon a potential enemy. It might have made him hesitate as he was about to attack, or attack if the deployment were particularly provocative. So it seems that there is little reason to doubt that morality is closely connected to the concepts of military strategy (strategist) and tactics (tactician) during peacetime as well as in times of war.

A third objection runs as follows. "You have admitted that at times choices between strategies and tactics will make no moral difference. One strategy or tactic will yield just as much harm or good as the another strategy or tactic. Isn't it true that in such cases there is no moral decision to be made just because it makes no moral difference what option is chosen? And doesn't that indicate that the connection between military strategy and tactics, and morality isn't that great?"

Hardly! Any kind of moral decision, military or non-military, might end in a calculation where the reasons (moral) on one side balance out the reasons on the other. It is true that, if that happens, the decision to go with one or the other option makes no moral difference. But the reasoning process is one that involves balancing reasons that themselves are moral. So it hardly means that types of activity such as devising strategy or tactics are not moral just because the result ends in a tie. A hockey game is still a hockey game even though the final score is 2 to 2.

The last objection I will deal with is the most serious. It gets to the heart of the matter. "Surely," the objector says, "you are not arguing that military strategy and tactics are tied to morality the way, for example, strategy and tactics in medicine are? Surely in medicine's case if a person acts in a grossly immoral fashion by using his knowledge of medicine to torture and crudely experiment on people, we do not count what he does as acts of medicine. This is because 'medicine' entails 'acting on behalf of people.' To medicate means to in some way or other be helpful to people with respect to their health or welfare. But in military matters, no matter how immoral the strategist or tactician is, he still is a military strategist or tactician. Not only that, he can be clever and imaginative, as we have seen, and also grossly immoral and, yet, we can still speak of him as a strategist and a tactician."

In order to assess this criticism, it is important to remember what concepts are being analyzed here. The analysis is not of the concepts of tactics or strategy in the abstract, but rather military tactics and military strategy. If the former pair were under analysis then it

might well be easier to make a case for saying that the concept of morality is not closely connected to them. Tactics and strategy in the abstract apply not just to military activities but to business practices, institutions such as hospitals and unions, and to games of all sorts. Since the goals of all these activities differ sharply from one another, the concepts of tactics and strategy, viewed in the abstract, are separable from morality. But military tactics and military strategy are narrower and richer concepts. As we have seen, these concepts involve arranging people in situations where many lives are at stake and where, speaking very roughly, the goals of the activity are circumscribable at least to some extent. The goals of military tactics and strategy, especially the latter, can vary all the way from cutting one's losses in defeat to achieving unconditional surrender of the enemy. Still, no matter what the precise nature of the goals may be, too many lives are at stake under too many varying conditions for anyone to suppose that the connection between military tactics and strategy, on the one side, and morality, on the other, is not a very close one.

In making the claim that these concepts are closely connected I am not, of course, saying that we can derive moral principles simply by analyzing the concepts of military strategy and tactics. In this sense these concepts are not like those of murder and theft. These latter legal and moral concepts characterize fairly specific sorts of behavior as immoral. They are what can be called verdict concepts. To know that someone has murdered or stolen is to have arrived at the verdict that an identifiable wrong has been done. In contrast, when we are military strategists or tacticians we do not know automatically that we

are doing something wrong or right, but at most that we are doing something that is assessable morally one way or the other. These are concepts of agency or perhaps they can best be labelled concepts of moral responsibility.

Further, my claim that there is a close connection between military strategy and tactics, on the one side, and morality, on the other, is not that it is just the same connection found between medicine and ethics. That latter connection is indeed via the stated purpose of medicine. One cannot achieve the purpose of medicine without engaging in activity that is not only moral in scope but, more specifically, morally good. The military's connection to ethics is not in terms of its purpose. As the objector claims, one can pursue military goals and not act morally. He is right about that. Rather, the connection has to do with agency and more broadly with what might be called the realm of ethics. The point is that military strategists and tacticians and their activities are unavoidably assessable in the realm of ethics or morality. They can act well or badly but, either way, given the consequences of the sorts of activity in which they are engaged, morality cannot be left out of our full understanding of their activity.

In this connection, notice the difference between a strategist or tactician in baseball and his counterpart in the military. The former can act immorally if he breaks or stretches the rules the way Leo Durocher was supposed to have done when he was a manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers and was supposed to have said "Nice guys finish last." In one sense, even games can be played morally or immorally. But when Leo calculated whether to send a runner to second or to have a batter take the next pitch, he was not engaged in moral thinking. The game

itself, one is tempted to say, is apart from, rather than a part of, the moral realm. It is as if baseball and ethics are two separate games. Military activity (including strategy and tactics) and morality are not in this same way two separate games. One reason they are not is that, when all is said and done, morality is never a separate "game." It is not an activity unto its own the way other activities such as baseball, business, research and academics are. We don't engage in business, academics and ethics. To suppose that we do is to make what Gilbert Ryle a generation ago called a category mistake.³ Morality has to do with how we engage in other activities and is not itself a separate activity. We can't engage in pure ethical activity in the sense that we do something moral or immoral and not be doing something else. In the days of G. E. Moore and the intuitionists in moral theory this point was expressed by saying that ethical qualities were piggy-backed. Given this piggy-backed character of morality it is understandable that morality's concern is with how we behave in the business, academic, legal, military world, etc. It has, we might say, the character of absorbing or encompassing activities of various sorts.

It is true that ethics is not all-encompassing. It does not absorb all activities. For instance, choices that we make between flavors of jello are not normally thought to have moral import. Nor do other so called taste choices such as color or brand of car we choose, type of home we live in, style of clothes we wear and so on. But although it is not all encompassing, moral judgments are powerful in that those activities encompassed by ethics have to pass muster. That is, they come by the label as non-moral only after they have been shown that they do not have any moral import. The reason for this, speaking

roughly, is that what counts as ethical or moral is thought to be important to the well-being of people. That is why games of baseball are not absorbed in the moral or ethical realm. The activity of playing the game itself (e.g., getting a hit) does not directly harm or help anyone.⁴ With military activity and planning it is otherwise. How these "games" are played makes a tremendous difference so that, my argument has been, they cannot help but belong within the realm of morality.

Having said that there is a close connection between military tactics/strategy and morality, I have not as yet specified whether this connection is so close as to be definitional or merely contingent in nature. It might be thought that answering this question is merely playing the philosopher's game and that it matters little how it is answered so long as the fact of a close connection has been established. There is something to be said for such a thought. Nonetheless, it does matter, to some extent, what the connection is since, if it is definitional, that is an indication that it is as close as it can possibly be.

Well, are these concepts connected definitionally? I think the right answer is "yes." Much of what I have said in this article can be summarized by saying that the connection is unavoidable and this suggests that the connection is definitional. One cannot be a military strategist or tactician and avoid facing moral problems. Once again, the definitional connection is not in terms of the purpose of these activities, the way medicine's connection is with ethics. If it were that sort of connection, one would have to be morally good in order to be a military strategist or tactician. The military strategist or

tactician is not necessarily acting morally when doing his work but he is acting (barring the sorts of ties mentioned above) either morally or immorally. If there were no connection here, he would be acting neither morally nor immorally the way Leo acted when he had his Dodger base-runners steal bases at every opportunity. So there is a connection between strategy and tactics, though the connection is subtle rather than straightforward. If it were less subtle, more like medicine's, it would have been obvious almost from the beginning what the answer to our question about the relationship between strategy and tactics and morality is. If it were that obvious, I would have had no reason to write such a long paper and there would then have been no real reason for having this conference in the first place.

Notes

1. I say non-morally rather than amorally because the latter term implies that a person has no sense of moral concern at all. He is like the wolf boy, unaware of these concerns. Acting non-morally, in contrast, implies that one is acting in an area that has no moral consequences or concerns (and that one is aware that this is so).

2. James M. Dubik, "Human Rights, Command Responsibility, and Walzer's Just War Theory," Philosophy and Public Affairs, 1982, pp. 354-371.

3. Gilbert Ryles, The Concept of Mind (N.Y.: Barnes and Noble, 1949), p. 16.

4. Indirectly, of course, harm can come about. The professional player who fails to steal second base or fails to get a hit may not get a contract next year. But the act of stealing second base itself is

not an immoral (or moral) act. It is, we are tempted to say, just part of a game.