

Moral Misconceptions: Five Flawed Assumptions Confuse Moral Judgments on War

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October 18, 2017

Conversations about the morality of war can be terribly frustrating. People tend to have strong moral feelings about war but muddled understandings about how to make moral judgments on war. Consequently, discussions about the morality of war often deteriorate into disputes about historical facts and attacks on the other person's moral character.

As a military ethicist who strives to keep such conversations constructive, I've come to recognize five popular misconceptions that sabotage efforts to think critically about morality and war. The mistaken assumptions undermine any realistic possibility of a war being morally justified. Therefore, the misconceptions must be addressed and debunked.

Misconception 1

“Choosing peace” is always an option: This is simply not true when peace has already been shattered by an aggressor. For a country debating whether to engage in a defensive war, its options are not “go to war or enjoy peace”; instead, they are “go to war or acquiesce to major human-rights violations.” Sometimes, the road to peace must pass through war.

Consider the biblical story of the good Samaritan, who is rightly praised for rendering medical care to the victim of a brutal assault. Faced with the options to either help the injured victim or walk by, he made the morally right choice. But what if the good Samaritan had arrived minutes earlier when the brutal assault was still taking place? His options would have been either to fight to defend the victim or to permit the continued assault. An option to “choose peace” wasn't available in that situation.

As combat veterans know all too well, war is the realm of bad options. A country that has been attacked must choose from a menu of bad options. Sometimes the only available option that leads to re-establishing a just peace is fighting back.

Misconception 2

Both sides in war are always wrong: This is a problem of language. We typically speak of both sides “going to war” as if they are doing the same thing, even when one side is morally guilty of starting the war and the other side is morally justified in countering the aggression. This imprecision in language blurs the moral situation. Consider how much clearer our moral terminology is when analyzing acts of violence that we understand better. When describing domestic crimes, for example, we use words that express the moral inequality among the parties, using terms such as assailant and victim. We don't say that the assailant and victim “engaged in an assault,” even in cases where the victim defended himself or herself. Rather, our word choices make clear that only one party is guilty of a crime, even if both used violence.

We should employ the same precision in moral language when talking about war. In almost every war, one side is guilty of initiating the violence or creating an imminent threat. That side is the aggressor. Although both sides in war engage in the same types of violent acts, those acts have different moral meanings when performed by the war's aggressors and defenders. Germany was wrong to invade Poland in 1939; the Polish were justified in fighting back. Iraq was wrong to invade Kuwait in 1990; Kuwait, the U.S., and their coalition partners were justified in fighting back.

Aggressors usually propagate false narratives that portray themselves as the aggrieved victims in the war. Their lies are obvious to impartial, informed observers. Yet because both sides claim to be victims and one side clearly is not, some observers cynically conclude that both sides must be lying and thus both sides are wrong. An alternative, better conclusion is that aggressors' reality-twisting narratives are evidence of humanity's recognition that wars do involve unjust aggressors and just defenders.



Soldiers with the 319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment fire a 155 mm howitzer in Iraq.

Misconception 3

Warfighting is analogous to a sports competition: Warfighting and team sports have much in common. Both are collective activities that demand teamwork, sacrifice and physical exertion to defeat an opponent. Both involve strategy and offensive and defensive operations.

But any sports analogy misrepresents the moral framework of war because it omits the central role that civilians have in war. In sports, defeating the other side is the goal, and both sides compete voluntarily as moral equals. Sports fans are extraneous to the purpose of the competition (with the exception of professional sports, which are really entertainment).

In war, however, defending a civilian community is the goal, and one side's aggression has forced the other side to fight. Civilians watching and hoping in a war's outcome are the very reason for the competition. The aggressors threaten them, and the defenders risk their lives to protect them.

War should be understood as a struggle over the most fundamental rights of a civilian political community, not merely as a battle between armies. Aggressors and defenders are defined by their relationship to that community, not to each other. War and sports have little in common morally.

Misconception 4

Motives must be pure: The 1990–91 First Gulf War was a paradigm case of a just war. Iraq invaded and occupied Kuwait, and the U.S. and other countries assisted Kuwaiti forces in liberating their country and re-establishing their government. Critics of the war claim that the United States' involvement was motivated by a desire to keep oil prices low. Even if they are right, would it matter?

I once swam too far out into the ocean, couldn't make it back to shore, and had to be rescued by a lifeguard. I don't know what the lifeguard's motivations were—perhaps any or all of duty, compassion, praise or a raise—but those were irrelevant to me, as long as she saved my life. Her lifesaving actions were morally good because of their outcome, regardless of her motivations.

Just like people, countries act on multiple motivations. In fact, the motives of our national security strategy are threefold—to protect American rights and to promote American interests and values. When the U.S. is attacked, our rights, interests and values align to fight back. In cases where another country is attacked, however, our rights are not directly at stake. Still, if promoting our interests and values motivates us to uphold the rights of others, that behavior should be praised, not condemned.

Misconception 5

Any immoral acts are evidence of an immoral war: Like onions and ogres, wars have many layers and are complex. A single war may involve millions of people organized into thousands of units engaged in continuous life-or-death operations. Inevitably, some soldiers' moral compasses become distorted by war's fierce emotions and unfortunate situations. Bad things happen in war, even in just wars.

We must keep in mind that worse things happen when aggression is permitted to prevail.

All parties in war should train and lead their soldiers to act morally, but no person and no organization is morally perfect. As long as moral violations in war are not systemic, they do not make an otherwise just war unjust.

The five common misconceptions addressed above are dangerous because they undermine a community's willingness to defend its rights. They spread a fallacious argument: "No side is perfect, so both sides are wrong, so we should never get involved in war." This line of reasoning

likely results from our population's unfamiliarity with war. After all, few would argue, "Some police officers commit unjust acts, so all police are as wrong as criminals, so we should disband all police departments."

The misconceptions may also help explain the disconcerting combination of gratitude, pity and fear that characterizes many Americans' attitudes toward combat veterans. They are grateful that veterans have sacrificed so much to defend their rights, even as they simultaneously suspect that what veterans did was immoral and worry that veterans might still be dangerous.

Our country would benefit greatly if every soldier and every citizen engaged in conversations about the morality of our wars. Those conversations would be more productive if their participants agreed on five elements of common moral ground: that sometimes peace isn't an option; that fighting to resist an evil is good; that just wars are fought to protect human rights; that mixed motives are morally permissible; and that immoral incidents are distinct from immoral wars.