

William H. Shaw – Utilitarianism and the Ethics of War

War has an obvious impact on human well-being, one that is almost always deleterious. Whatever good a given war might conceivably produce or whatever evils it may forestall, by definition it involves death and destruction, mayhem and misery. Even in periods of peace, the need to be prepared for war also affects human well-being, diverting human and material resources along channels that, viewed by themselves, are less productive of well-being than obvious alternatives to them. It is not surprising, then, that Jeremy Bentham and James Mill were concerned with the causes of war and how best to avoid it. However, neither they nor John Stuart Mill, who wrote about some of the violent conflicts of his day, addressed in sufficient detail two key ethical questions: (1) when, if ever, are we morally justified in waging war and (2) if recourse to arms is warranted, how are we permitted to fight the wars we wage? Nor have contemporary utilitarians examined these questions with the care they deserve.

[...]

When, if ever, may we wage war?

It is extremely unlikely that any war, viewed as a whole, has been a welfare-optimal event or series of events. There will almost certainly have been some alternative state of affairs that the nations in question could have brought about instead that would have been better on utilitarian grounds. Indeed, there will often have been an outcome open to the belligerents that would have been better for each of them individually. That's why wars so often look like collective folly. However, the decision that an individual state faces is not how all states should act, but rather how it should act in the particular situation in which it finds itself.

When, then, should a state go to war? From a utilitarian perspective, it is not enough that the war's benefits outweigh its costs, taking into account the interests of all. There must also be no alternative course of action open to the state that would lead to better results (for example, not responding to the provocation, conceding land or influence, surrendering, or relying on nonviolent, civil resistance). Formalizing this idea and filling in a few details, we can say that utilitarianism entails the following principle:

A state is morally justified in waging war *if and only if* no other course of action available to it would result in greater expected well-being; otherwise, waging war is wrong.

This principle is formulated in terms of *expected* outcomes. Some utilitarians, however, prefer to frame the theory in terms of *actual* outcomes. There are considerations for and against both approaches. In practice, though, there is little difference between them because the only way we have of trying to maximize actual well-being is to act so as to maximize expected well-being.

If a state is justified – if it acts rightly – in waging war, then it is morally permitted to do so. Is it also required to wage war? The answer is that a state is morally required to wage war, as opposed to being merely permitted to do so, if and only if waging war would result in greater expected well-being than anything else it could do. This implies that, if the well-being expected from some other course of action (A) is equivalent to that of waging war (W), and no course of action B, C, D, . . . etc. has equivalent or greater expected utility, then although a state must choose either A or W, it is not required to select one rather than the other. It acts rightly if it

opts for either. This may sound like a purely theoretical point. But given the difficulties of estimating expected well-being, the possibility of ties may not be so remote.

Two further points should be clarified. First, there are various kinds of war that states can fight. This entails that a state will often be presented not simply with a choice between waging war and not waging war but rather between the latter and various possible wars of differing scope, type, or intensity. Second, the decision whether to wage war is not a one-time, once-and-for-all decision. Even if war is initially warranted on utilitarian grounds, circumstances can change so that a state ceases to be justified in continuing it.

The utilitarian approach to war is simple, but it is also attractive. Commonsense morality, I believe, would recoil at the suggestion that it can be right to wage war when there is an alternative to fighting that would have better results. And if well-being is understood in a broad sense that acknowledges the importance of liberty and self-determination for human flourishing (as Mill and many subsequent utilitarians have thought), then commonsense morality might well accept the explicitly utilitarian proposition that wars should be waged only when nothing else would bring about greater well-being. One does not have to be a utilitarian, however, to believe that this normative standard is basically correct. One can consistently endorse it while nevertheless believing that utilitarianism does not provide a fully satisfactory general account of right and wrong. A non-consequentialist, that is, could well believe that utilitarianism is deficient as an overall normative theory, perhaps because it sometimes demands too much of us or fails to place sufficient weight on our individual projects and attachments, and yet believe that wars ought to be waged only when doing so satisfies the utilitarian standard.

Widespread acceptance of the utilitarian criterion of justified war would be a profound and salutary change. Throughout history, wars have been defended in terms that either ignore consequences altogether or focus on consequences that have little or nothing to do with human well-being, that is, with how well or poorly real people will fare as a result of war. For example, wars have often been defended as necessary to uphold national honor or avenge some historical grievance. And even when consequentialist-sounding considerations are adduced in support of war, policy-makers typically discount or neglect altogether the consequences for other peoples, and they rarely think through the probable gains and losses of fighting in a detailed and objective way. They may claim, and frequently do, that there is no viable alternative to war, that the stakes are extremely high, and that the consequences of not fighting would be too terrible to contemplate, yet these claims are almost always overconfident and unsubstantiated.

Three common objections addressed

Many of the common objections to utilitarianism as a comprehensive moral theory are inapplicable to its criterion of justified war, which is a relatively specific normative principle of limited domain. However, there are three objections to utilitarianism that are widely seen as having special force when applied to its treatment of war. Let us examine these.

The first objection is that utilitarian reasoning is susceptible to abuse – in particular, that it can be, and has been, used to justify all sorts of immoral wars. To be sure, wily leaders have often rationalized the wars they wished to fight by spurious appeals to the greater good. However, they have not refrained from also exploiting various non-utilitarian rationales – appealing, for example, to religious duty, to the glory or honor of the nation, or to some

historical injustice it has allegedly suffered. The devious or deluded can twist almost any moral principle into supporting morally objectionable policies. Utilitarianism is no more prone to misuse of this sort than are other moral theories. Even if it were, this would not show that it fails to provide a satisfactory normative criterion for assessing wars, only that the criterion has to be handled with care. Furthermore, the proper response to superficial and fallacious consequentialist arguments for war is not to abandon consequentialist thinking to the ignorant and unscrupulous, but rather to examine with as much specificity and meticulousness as possible the likely results of waging war in the given circumstances, taking into account the interests of all.

But what are those interests? Utilitarians wish to promote the well-being of sentient creatures as much as possible. For them, wellbeing is all that ultimately matters. The second objection, however, is that well-being is an uncertain concept, and that it is hard to know what really does make people's lives go better or worse. Now it is true that philosophers have different conceptions or definitions of wellbeing and also that, whatever conception of well-being one favors, there is much we do not know about the social and psychological factors that conduce to human flourishing. However, even if we have a lot left to learn, we already know quite a bit about the things that promote well-being, on the one hand, or impair or thwart it, on the other. Moreover, when it comes to war, we are not dealing with subtle questions of value. Killing and maiming people, orphaning children, destroying farms and factories, dislocating civilians, ripping up the economic infrastructure of a country and damaging its cultural heritage – these are patently destructive of well-being. On the other hand, there is no question that physical and psychological security, personal liberty, political self-determination, and respect for territorial integrity promote well-being and that war may sometimes protect these values.

But even if we can make plausible assessments of comparative value, our knowledge of the future is tenuous and uncertain. This is the basis of the third objection, namely, that when it comes to specific questions of war and peace, the future is too unpredictable for us to make reliable judgments about the likely consequences of the alternatives open to us. It has to be granted that, when making decisions, people can and frequently do overlook some courses of action altogether, and with regard to the alternatives they do consider, they often miss some possible outcomes or miscalculate their probability. Further, human reasoning is often plagued by faulty background assumptions, wishful thinking, and various cognitive errors. And especially when it comes to war, emotion and social pressure can further cloud people's judgment. Our epistemic situation is far from hopeless, however. We often foresee reasonably well where our actions will lead, and our anticipations of the future frequently prove more or less correct. When it comes to war, in particular, it may be possible to learn from the past. At the very least, history can teach us to be more modest and circumspect and to acknowledge our own fallibility.

Hardly anyone has used the utilitarian standard to assess particular wars. If they were to do so, it seems clear that it would imply that many wars were morally unjustified and should not have been fought and that neither side acted in a way that promoted the well-being of all. About some wars, it may not be obvious what careful utilitarian reflection would show. I shall consider below some strategies for making the utilitarian criterion easier to apply in practice, but when it comes to big, complicated real-world questions of war and peace, we have no reason for assuming that the correct normative principle, whatever it may be, will always give us simple

and effortless answers. And, as suggested earlier, the fact that an ethical criterion is sometimes, or even often, difficult to apply does not show that it is incorrect.

Úkol

1. Vysvětlete, kdy je podle utilitaristické etiky možné, či dokonce nutné uchýlit se k válce a v jakých případech považuje utilitarista vedení války za nemorální.
2. Identifikujte hlavní slabiny i přednosti utilitaristického přístupu k válce. Vycházejte jako vždy ze zadaného textu, ale můžete připojit i vlastní úvahy a hodnocení.
3. Lze nalézt nějaké předpoklady, kritéria či závěry ohledně etiky války, které se zdají být platné z hlediska utilitarismu i teorie spravedlivé války? Shodují se tyto přístupy na něčem? Postačí, jestliže si odpověď na tuto třetí otázku pouze promyslíte. Pokud byste ji ale někdo chtěl zpracovat písemně, budu tomu rád.