

War and Moral Dissonance

This collection of essays, inspired by the author's experience teaching ethics to Marine and Navy chaplains during the Iraq War, examines the moral and philosophical dilemmas posed by war. The first chapter deals directly with Dr. Peter A. French's teaching experience and the specific challenges posed by teaching applied and theoretical ethics to men and women wrestling with the immediate and personal moral conflicts occasioned by the dissonance of their duties as military officers with their religious convictions. The following chapters grew out of philosophical discussions with these chaplains regarding specific ethical issues surrounding the Iraq War, including the nature of moral evil, forgiveness, mercy, retributive punishment, honor, torture, responsibility, and just war theory. This book represents a unique viewpoint on the philosophical problems of war, illuminating the devastating toll combat experiences take on both an individual's sense of identity and a society's professed moral code.

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Preface

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have taken a physical and psychological toll on a group in the United States military that has received very little attention in the media: chaplains. Navy chaplains serving with Marine, Coast Guard, and Naval units have responsibilities for ethical education in those units and are tasked as moral advisers to command, as well as provide religious services and counseling. I begin this book with a memoir of my experiences for more than two years (2004–2006) as an instructor in intensive weeklong sessions held at bases and camps around the world teaching Navy chaplains about ethics and the virtues so that they can better fulfill their assignments in theater and during other deployments. Although I have been a university philosophy professor for more than forty years, I had never taken on such an assignment, though I did teach at Homestead Air Force Base for the Air Force during the Vietnam War. I have tried to describe what it was like for those of us on the teaching team to design and teach a suitable ethics curriculum for chaplains who are suffering through identity-challenging personal conflicts while trying to perform their multiple roles in the combat zones. The religious beliefs the chaplains espouse often clash with the realities they confront in a war that many worry cannot be morally justified, and for some chaplains, the curriculum we designed added intellectual ammunition to their concerns about the moral legitimacy of the enterprise in which they had staked their professional careers.

My experiences with the chaplains, most having just recently returned from Iraq or Afghanistan, sometimes bordered on the surrealistic and often jumped that border. Many of the chaplains were tormented by psychological demons that had inhabited them during their combat-zone deployments. Some chaplains had vivid flashback experiences during

the teaching sessions. Too many of them seemed to be untreated post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) sufferers. All wrestled with the moral schizophrenia that they wear on their uniforms: they are officers in the war machine and they are ordained representatives of religious faiths that typically preach beliefs antithetical to the “virtues” of the military. Many of the chaplains confided some of their horrific stories to me of personally witnessed human destruction and, in their clerical roles, of listening to confessions and confused cries for psychological and theological help from Marines who had committed or had witnessed patently immoral acts during their tours of duty.

I have not felt comfortable telling the story of my Iraq War experience until recently, but for many reasons, some purely philosophical, some emotional, some pedagogical, and some because of a nagging sense of duty, I have decided to tell it. I suspect that as philosophers ensconced in our academic offices and university classrooms we seldom imagine what it might be like to try to teach Aristotle, Kant, and Mill, as well as concepts like moral conflict and honor and the nature of evil, to students who cannot drive grotesque demons out of their heads while having committed themselves both to religious ideals and military duty. It is a story of responsibility accepted and shirked on individual, collective, and corporate levels.

I have not used the names of any of the chaplains with whom I had discussions about the philosophical and religious issues that were haunting their waking and sleeping hours. Although all of the chaplains knew that what they told any of us on the teaching team would not be held in the confidence of the confessional, many poured out stories that they personally felt the need to unburden and, I believe, some wanted those stories to reach a wider audience not because they hoped they would be agents of change but because the impact of political decisions that purport to represent the will of the American public should not be kept secret from that public. Though they may have felt that most of us “can’t handle the truth,” they also seemed to feel that we should not be shielded from it by an antiseptic mask of political rhetoric. Some, however, simply could not help themselves. They had seen too much to be circumspect. I have not told all of their stories.

Many of the chaplains during our intense teaching sessions raised important philosophical questions on topics related to the experiences they were undergoing. Some of them spoke privately with me during breaks about topics they wanted to further explore and some raised issues that kept me awake in my base quarters jotting down notes about

what I wished I had said in response to their probing. A number pointedly asked me to write on specific topics at which I had only hinted as to what my position might shape up to be. This book is the result of my responding to the philosophical provocations the experience produced.

I hope my memoir will help philosophers and students understand not only the relevancy challenges of what we teach but also the reality of the Hell in which what we teach runs smack-dab into the physical and mental carnage of human enterprises.

After the memoir, the remaining chapters of the book are attempts to deal with the topics with which the chaplains and I were most engaged, either in formal sessions or in personal discussions. The second chapter examines conceptions of human nature and the nature of moral evil. It should come as no surprise that the chaplains were concerned about both topics and that many wanted to believe that human beings are inherently good, despite the evidence before their eyes and in their nightmares. I find it easy to give an abstract definition of moral evil that is likely to be acceptable to most people regardless of their philosophical or theological commitments. However, it is much harder to concretely identify cases of wickedness that rise to the level of sheer evil. I played around with that idea for many years, mentioning it on a number of occasions to some of the chaplains, and I used some of my thoughts on the matter in a chart I devised for one of the formal sessions. In the 1980s, I wrote what might be called a “treatment” for a video presentation on evil. A paper that Richard Taylor published in which he tried to sort out the various ways we might catalogue evildoers inspired it. I borrowed Taylor’s motif of a sudden vacancy in Hell when Satan is pardoned by God, occasioning the formation of a search committee, analogous to those with which academics are well acquainted, to nominate the successor. I decided to expand the original conception into a report of the dialogue among the demons on the search committee who are trying to identify different types of evildoers, aided by the views of certain classical philosophers, in order to evaluate the credentials of some nominees to sit on the Throne of Hell. I have included the resulting piece as an appendix to Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 focuses on the loss of innocence and its role in moral responsibility. Although only a few chaplains raised this matter directly with me, because I had written on the subject in *Responsibility Matters*, I used the topic as a way into a discussion of moral conflict and tragedy when I developed one of the sessions for the second year of the training. It should come as no surprise that experiences of war, particularly in urban combat zones, provoke loss of innocence in young Marines, who, despite

their training and macho swagger, discover they haven't really confronted their own capacity to do and be done evil. What I wrote in the earlier book on the subject has also been recently discussed in the philosophical literature and gave me good reasons to reevaluate some of my views on the matter and respond to expansions on it developed by Michael McKenna.

In Chapter 4, I discuss forgiveness, mercy, and retributive punishment as ways of responding to moral evil. The chapter recalls distinctions drawn in the second chapter and uses the true story of Simon Wiesenthal's confrontation while in a Nazi concentration camp with a dying SS soldier who begged Wiesenthal to forgive him for atrocities he had committed against Jews during the Holocaust. The case was the one on which I focused a session for the chaplains that provoked considerable conflict because for many, their faith group commitments to doctrines of forgiveness and mercy are extremely difficult to honor in wartime situations.

One of the chaplains in a private conversation in Naples, Italy, asked me whether ethics was always just applying the formulae of certain standard theories to specific cases and, more or less, reading off the results. Perhaps part of the reason for his thinking that might be the crux of applied ethics was that in the first year of the sessions, we had spent considerable time trying to teach deontological, utilitarian, and divine-command ethical theories to the chaplains. The impression that was left with some of them, and may very well be what a number of Ethics 101 students in college get, was that applied ethics is rather like a buffet dinner with the entrees set out in trays from which one can choose to fill one's plate. What the chaplain wanted to know was whether a person could invent his or her own normative rules and principles and act on them and still be acting ethically. As I understood the question, or so I put it to the chaplain, the issue was whether there is such a thing as moral originality, and if there is, how would what is original in a person's normative principles be assessed within the field of ethics. The chaplain nodded and said he had in mind Jesus Christ. Of course he did. Chapter 5 is my attempt to deal with the identification and assessment of purported original moral principles and rules.

Chapter 6 derives from the session I created for the second year of the training course. It is on a concept that is taken to be essential to the military: honor. Honor's twin, shame, plays a structurally important role in military units, particularly in those with strong traditions of cohesion and group identity such as the Marine Corps.

I take up a very difficult topic in Chapter 7. The interrogation of detainees following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda in the United States became a central element in the Bush administration's prosecution of its global war on terror. The techniques that were approved for use by interrogators verged on and then crossed the line into what is identified in American and international law as torture. During the 2004 sessions with the Navy chaplains, the evidence of extensive mistreatment of detainees in the old Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq were revealed to the public in a number of graphic photographs and media stories. The chaplains expressed shame when I asked them how seeing the pictures made them feel, but some also admitted that they knew of similar treatments of prisoners and detainees by Marines. I wrote the chapter to explore some of the ways the American government tried to justify what it called "enhanced interrogation techniques" and to make a case, based on an understanding of the concept of will found in Harry Frankfurt's work, for interrogational torture as inherently immoral.

A rather bizarre case of extraordinarily severe injuries suffered by a Marine in Iraq combined with an extreme case of PTSD provoked my attempt in Chapter 8 to make a plausible case, denied by Hubert Dreyfus and others, that a person could live a worthwhile life confined to a metaverse like that provided by *Second Life*. In Chapter 9, I sort out various uses of "ought" and "must" as they are used in institutional settings. That sets the stage for "Inference Gaps in Moral Assessment" (Chapter 10), in which I argue that moral judgments about organizations and individuals cannot be inferred directly from moral judgments about the institutions of which they are concrete instantiations and in which they function professionally. My thinking about the topic arose through considering the situation in which military chaplains typically find themselves, namely, working for an organization whose primary reason for existence is to do the very sorts of things proscribed by the doctrines of the faith groups to which they belong.

Chapter 11, "Blaming Whole Populations: The American People and the Iraq War," is based on one of the earliest papers I published on the topic of collective responsibility. On revisiting the earlier paper, I radically altered it to reflect on certain episodes in the Iraq War that were recounted to me by some of the chaplains. The issue, however, that prompted the earlier paper regarding the Vietnam War is still prominent: Does it make sense to ascribe collective moral responsibility to the American people for the barbaric behavior of those who are fighting in a foreign country in the name of the American government and nation?

Chapter 12 has a very strange history. It was provoked by a discussion I had with a group of the chaplains about whether someone who was relentlessly infused since early childhood with an intolerant perspective, a particular cultural point of view, should be held morally responsible for acting on the hatreds and prejudices that are so much a part of who they understand themselves to be, individually and collectively, and their place in the world. The chaplains had in mind insurgents and terrorists who were raised in madrasahs to hate Americans, American culture, modernity, Israel, Judaism, and Christianity. Early versions of the chapter were read in Florida and in Utah, and I was prepared to give it as the Veroni Memorial Lecture at Kent State University in 2008. I argue that collective memories (or what also may be called heritage stories) are a potential source of a type of moral impairment that I call being “morally challenged.” The third section of the chapter provides an account of how collective memories have the capacity to cause what Harry Frankfurt called “volitional necessity” leading to moral challenges for some people, especially in situations in which the groups of which they are members are acting concertedly. The primary point is that though collective memories may engender volitional necessity in people and render them morally challenged in certain circumstances with regard to doing the right thing, they do not convert them into moral incompetents with respect to whom the assessment of moral responsibility is inappropriate. In that section, I offer examples of how I believe some people may have become morally challenged when their leaders used their heritage stories or collective memories to incite them to the performance of untoward actions. As one of a number of examples, I mention the speeches of Slobodan Milosevic that recalled the 1389 battle on the Field of Blackbirds as a way of motivating Serbs against Kosovo Muslims. I say nothing about the morality of the Serbian people. However, after a poster announcing my forthcoming lecture was distributed on the Kent State University campus and on its website in which my discussion of the Serbian/Kosovo example was cited, there arose from the Serbian community in Ohio and then internationally an outcry of complaints and accusations regarding what some believed were my views about Serbs and Serbian culture. This escalated into an outrageously false and, I believe, libelous article on a Serbian-American website in which my views were mischaracterized as the claim that “Serbian people are rapists and killers because they are delusional about their history during the time they lived under the Islamic Law in Kosovo.” I make no such claim. The Serbian-American website went on to say that I must be in the pay of the Saudi royal family, CNN, or

the Kosovar Albanians. This was, of course, nonsense. Unfortunately, the audience interest in the lecture that was incited by all of that publicity was poisonous. I received a number of harassing emails from Serbs in this country and elsewhere, accusing me of racism, of being a closet Islamist, of collaboration with those who would destroy Western civilization, and much more incendiary rubbish. My life was threatened and I was told to expect a very unpleasant experience at Kent State should I dare to give the lecture. The utter irrationality and vituperative rhetoric of the attacks from the supporters of Serbia made it clear that there was little likelihood that the planned lecture would be a worthwhile philosophical experience. A Serbian priest in Cleveland, Ohio, telephoned to warn me not to give the lecture, that he knew of some people, presumably from his congregation, planning to seriously injure or perhaps kill me. I was begged to confess my ignorance of Serbian history and culture and profusely apologize for my offenses on the Serbian-American website. I was persuaded by my family and friends to cancel my appearance at Kent State even though the campus police said they would guarantee my safety and a group of Albanians from Detroit wrote me volunteering to come to Kent and, in no uncertain terms, to protect me from the Serbs. They vowed it would be the battle of the Field of Blackbirds all over again! Reading the chapter should persuade any reasonable person that the Serbs had nothing over which to get so heated.

Chapter 13 is a direct result of my using the suicide note of Colonel Ted Westhusing to focus a discussion of the duties of chaplains confronting the fragility of human beings whose deeply held convictions and commitments have been shattered by the realities of their experiences. Colonel Westhusing expressed in that note his utter disdain for the way corporations and private contractors had commandeered what he believed to be the justifiable mission of the troops in Iraq to their own monetary advantage and were also performing shoddily to the detriment of soldiers and Marines who were trying to do their jobs and get home more or less in one piece. Outstanding work on issues of corporate responsibility by Deborah Tollefsen, Denis Arnold, and Carlos Gomez-Jara Diez drew me back to my earlier work on corporate responsibility and significantly contributed to my reexamining the structure of corporate responsibility and punishment, with special attention paid to the performance of KBR, Inc., on the bases in Iraq.

The final chapter takes up the application of just war theory to the parade of missions that the Bush administration trotted out as reasons for invading Iraq and occupying the country. I am particularly interested

in the purported justifications of preemptive and preventive war and also conclude with a commentary on the mission of establishing democracy as a legitimate *casus belli* when it is unclear what sort of democracy is intended and whether the culture being gifted with whatever form of democracy is in the package is a reasonable recipient.

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This book is dedicated to the men and women of the Navy Chaplain Corps with whom I spent many long hours as described in the memoir that is Chapter 1. Many have served multiple deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, in support facilities, and on ships. All, I hope, return safely and will receive the care and honors that they have earned.

An earlier version of Chapter 6 was published in *Public Affairs Quarterly* in 2002 under the title “Honor, Shame, and Identity.”

A version of Chapter 8 was written for a conference on philosophy and recreation held at the University of North Florida in November 2008.

Chapter 9 is a reworking of a paper that appeared in the *Journal of Philosophy* in October 1977 as “Institutional and Moral Obligations or Merels and Morals.”

An early version of Chapter 10 was read at the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) in Paris as part of a conference and was published in French as “Les ruptures du raisonnement déductif dans les évaluations morales: Capitalisme, entreprises et individus.”

Chapter 11 is a revisitation and radical reworking of a paper first published in 1974 by Oxford University Press in a collection edited by

Held, Morganbesser, and Nagel called *Philosophy, Morality, and International Affairs*.

Parts of Chapters 3 and 13 are from my response to papers written by Michael McKenna and Deborah Tollefson honoring my work in an issue of the *American Philosophical Association, Newsletter on Philosophy and Law*, edited by Steven Scalet and Christopher Griffin (Spring 2008).

The latter part of Chapter 14 owes much to “The Meanings of Democracy: A Western Perspective,” which was given at the World Congress of Philosophy in Boston and published in *Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy*, Volume XI, “Social and Political Philosophy” (2001).