WHEN SOLDIERS AREN’T HEROES: AN ESSAY

Michael Minch
Utah Valley State College

During the Vietnam War, one could often see posters which read, “What if they gave a war and nobody came”? The observation below is a variation on this poster’s theme. I write that it is an observation because it is hardly an argument. That is, the observation seems so straight-forward that all one need do is acknowledge it, yet I write the essay that follows because I have never heard it acknowledged, at least with something like the precision I offer below. In our society, people ubiquitously refer to persons in the American military as heroes. That is, simply to wear a uniform makes one a hero in the eyes of many, and certainly, this is all the more true during a popular war. Indeed, it is not hard to suppose that this unreflective and immediate attachment of heroic status to military persons tracks closely to whatever conflicts and tasks in which the U.S. military is engaged at any time, and the popularity, or lack of it, of those conflicts and tasks. I will not take the time to discover the use of this discourse in previous American wars, all I need say for present purposes, is to note that now, as soldiers are on the ground in Afghanistan and Iraq, American military personnel are everywhere in the United States called heroes.

In related fashion, it is common to hear people say, “Whether the war (in Iraq) is moral or immoral, we should honor our soldiers there.” It does not dawn on them to consider that fighting an immoral war would make one an immoral actor. How can it be right to fight a wrong war? How can it be honorable to fight a dishonorable war? It seems certain they’ve never considered the question. But could any question be more straightforward? If it is honorable to do what is moral and, concomitantly, then, dishonorable to do what is immoral, then clearly an argument needs to be made that we can honor those fighting an immoral war as heroes.¹ My point here, I should add, will not be to argue about the
morbidity or immorality of any given war. My observation applies to all wars, past, present, and future; and indeed, is not in the primary sense, about war at all. The meaning of “hero” and “honor” is moral in nature. Even in the military context, the word is not synonymous with “courage.” Soldiers who act courageously in an immoral cause, say, in defending Saddam Hussien’s regime, would not be thought of as heroes by those, like us, who thought of his regime as immoral. A hero is a person who does something which requires a significant degree of courage and/or sacrifice, and the something done by that person is seen to be moral. 2 “Hero,” then, as with “honor,” is a moral conception.

But what about morality? What I want to acknowledge at this point is that most people in Western traditions think of morality as having an intimate and necessary connection to personal rational autonomy. I will not address this necessary element of moral life in all the possible traditions that have informed and shaped contemporary American culture (which would, in fact, be all those of the Western tradition). But I can simply note that Aristotelianism and other agent-oriented ethics — Christian ethics, deontology, and utilitarianism — all theorize one’s individual, autonomous rational capacity as a necessary component of morality itself. Let me first say a word about what I mean by personal rational autonomy.

It is instructive that two people who recognize that persons, as individuals, make moral choices through rational means (which doesn’t mean that such choices are intelligent, or the best choices possible) are both known for situating morality within cultural, societal, historically-contingent, and narrative contexts. Michael Oakeshott writes that moral autonomy is the character of the agent, “in his action or utterance as self-disclosure and self-enactment in a contingent subscription of his own to the conditions of a practice... Human conduct is not first having unconditional wants... and then allowing prudential reason and moral sensibility to indicate or to determine the choice of the actions in which their satisfaction is sought; it is wanting intelligently (that is, in recognition of prudential and moral consideration)....” 3 Alasdair MacIntyre writes that each of us “has to choose both with whom we wish to be morally bound and by what ends, rules, and virtues we wish to be guided.” 4 The point here is that even in those moral theories in which our situatedness in communities, traditions, and narratives are emphasized, personal rational autonomy is still recognized as an inescapable and essential feature of what morality is.
By Aristotelianism, I refer not narrowly to Aristotle alone, but to virtue ethics (or aeretaic ethics), the agent-oriented tradition, including that tradition as it became part of the Medieval synthesis with Christian thought, through the work primarily of Aquinas. It is indeed, essential to agent-oriented ethics that persons must choose for themselves, as rational agents, the courses their lives follow to the degree that such choices are possible in any given circumstance. When faced with a moral decision, I must decide what to do given all that I can “bring to the table” regarding that decision. As Aristotle made clear, my education, socialization, tradition-formation, and such, will greatly influence my accounting of what is moral and immoral and what choices are available to me. Nevertheless, as a rational agent, I am responsible for making the decision, I must make it, given my (morally necessary) willingness to work through the problem presented to me, given the best moral judgment I can muster.

Christian ethics, no less, identify the agent as morally responsible for her moral decisions. Of course, the New Testament and subsequent Christian theology is far more pessimistic than Aristotle and other virtue theorists about our ability to actually do the right thing. Nevertheless, we are responsible to do it; we are held accountable as individuals as to our moral decisions. The New Testament is clear, and one might note Romans, chapters one through three, as a good example, that both Jews and Gentiles are “without excuse” when it comes to our personal adventures in sin.

Deontological moral theory famously essentializes personal rational autonomy. Personal responsibility and autonomy, and rational capacity are at the heart of Kant’s project and all subsequent deontology by definition. This is easily seen, of course, in the summation of morality that Kant named the “categorical imperative.” He summarized that as moral agents we must all as individuals ask ourselves if what we would do in any given situation is something we could authorize as a law that all people would have to do in that same situation. This universalization of moral law excludes no rational agent, all mentally capable adult human beings must ask themselves, “What must I do?” And, that question is answered in respect to what all people should by moral necessity do in the same situation. This is, of course, a philosophical analogue to the “Golden Rule” found in the Gospels (and in other forms in other religious texts) — Do to others what you would have done to you (Matthew 7:12, Luke 6:27). Thus the universalization of moral law (in deontology and Christianity) is a personal, autonomous, and rational event.
Utilitarianism, in all its forms, likewise, takes it as an essential component of moral life that persons determine for themselves, what they must do as moral agents in any given situation. Mill famously asserted that we are all free to do whatever we want to do so long as it does not harm another. He understood it to be the case that we are rational beings such that we can determine what would, in fact, harm others (he was certainly too optimistic in this respect). Of utilitarianism as a whole system, he wrote that it was entirely compatible with, and nearly but a restatement of the “Golden Rule.” One of the two principal foundations for utilitarianism is that all people matter and all people matter equally. This means, among other things, that we are all autonomous agents, and that morality demands that we treat all others in recognition of this fact.

Having so briefly reminded the reader that the four primary moral traditions of Western societies all unambiguously take the personal, autonomous, and rational features of morality to be essential, I will briefly identify criteria of the Just War Tradition/Just War Theory (at times hereafter: JWT). St. Augustine (Aurelius Augustinas, 353-430) is the primary source for the JWT. While he drew on sources before him, and many others have modified the JWT since his theory, his remains the primary defining formation of the JWT. Augustine’s place in history is crucial to the meaning of his City of God, where his Just War Theory is found. He was the Bishop of Hippo and the most important theological voice in the church just as Christianity had become Christendom. In the first three centuries of the church’s existence, nonviolence was an absolute and defining feature of the Christian community. Allegiance to Christ meant that violence must be renounced. Yet, with the turning point marked by the Emperor Constantine, Christianity became the favored religion, and with Constantine’s successor, the official religion of the Empire. Augustine found himself in a Roman Empire which had become “Christianized” in a formal sense, and the church was now filled with pagans. He wrote The City of God to address this problematic, to give guidance to the Christian trying to live a faithful life in an empire, and to defend Christians blamed for the fall of the Empire, which was crumbling as he wrote.

His Just War Theory seeks to look back to the church’s past and somehow draw it into the present. Absolute political nonviolence is not reaffirmed, but his theory about when war can be moral is an attempt to limit war, rather than justify it. He wants to convince Christians to live as Christians even while they must live in an Empire that pulls at them in sinful directions. It is important to note that Augustine thought that all
Michael Minch: When Soldiers Aren’t Heroes 35

criteria (just cause, legitimate authority, and right intention) must be satisfied in order for a war to be just. As I wrote above, Augustine provided the trajectory that just war theorists have developed more fully. The criteria are now commonly understood to demand that a just war:

1. Have a just cause.
2. Be waged by a legitimate authority.
3. Be formally declared.
4. Be fought with a peaceful intention (peace must be its goal).
5. Be a last resort.
6. Have a reasonable probability of success.
7. Use means proportionate to the ends sought.

These criteria are jus ad bellum reasons allowing for a moral war. The following jus in bello criteria, moral criteria for conducting war, are:

1. Noncombatants must be given immunity.
2. Prisoners must be treated humanely.
3. International treaties and conventions must be honored.

It is easy to identify a number of problems with the criteria above, many of the difficulties having to do with applying them to concrete situations. But it is important for our present purposes only to note that according to the JWT, war, if it is to be moral, must have a set of guiding and obliging criteria which hold the possibility and conduct of war to moral principles.

It is worth adding here that the United States military, like most others, also affirms its own set of military ethics, and while there is no need to explore such military codes here, the point is simply that it is understood that war presents a moral problem, and the use of organized lethal force must therefore be justified. That is, even within the military’s own premises about war, it cannot be moral to use lethal violence (or support others in so doing) simply because one is told to do so. One can simply note here that soldiers are commanded by rule not to follow unjust commands, such as those given at Mi Lai.6

We have seen that according to the four most influential moral theories of Western civilization (and one could add all other moral theories, including our intuitions/intuitionism), and according to the JWT and military codes of ethics, morality requires personal, autonomous, rational decision making. There is more to living a moral life than this, of course,
in all moral theories, but such autonomous responsibility is essential in all conceptions of morality. It follows then, that heroism and honor require, or at the minimum cannot be disassociated from, such personal rational responsibility. It also follows that an unjust war cannot be fought by heroes or with honor. It also follows that if a war is just, it can be fought by heroes and with honor (if they do so according to *jus in bello* criteria). This can be put in a syllogism:

| Heroism requires morality, |
| Honor requires morality, |
| An unjust war is immoral, |
| Therefore, an unjust war fought by (autonomous and rational) moral agents means those agents cannot be warriors who are heroic or honorable, |
| Therefore, only a moral war can be fought by heroes with honor. |

It should be added that, since life is never as simple as a syllogism, it is possible that specific situations and actions within an unjust war can be occasions of heroism or honor. That is, that a warrior who is otherwise engaged in an unjust war could find himself in a set of circumstances where he acts with honor and heroism. Nothing in my argument here disallows this observation. My purpose is to call to our attention what can be called “stand-in-line-ism.” That is, if everything noted above is correct, then it cannot be moral to abdicate one’s moral responsibility, one’s own status as an autonomous rational being, who must ultimately make moral decisions for herself. That is, we can’t, by definition, give our moral decisions over to others, to do so is to violate morality; to shirk one’s moral responsibility. Going to war is a moral decision, it must be made by each moral agent on his own. To simply get in line, ready to do what another tells you to do, cannot be a moral action if one does not already know what the line is for. If a war is determined to be moral, using criteria similar or identical to that above, then the agent who has made such a decision can decide to engage in that war, and subsequently may do so with honor and heroism. To stand in line waiting for another to tell one to engage in war puts one at peril, morally speaking. If one determines that the war is moral, he will have been fortunate; if one determines the war is immoral, he will have no moral choice but to get out of line, and face the proper consequences. The exercise of the virtue of sound moral judgment (*phronesis*) would dictate that we do not get into
lines until we are quite certain we’ll be able to remain there with sound moral convictions intact.

If my argument is clear, we will be able to see yet another incoherence that is a part of our popular discourse. It is common to hear persons say that soldiers are “serving their country,” and quite often, almost routinely, military personnel say this of themselves. Yet, this can be straightforwardly true only in a trite way, if at all. A “mule” may serve a cocaine dealer, but in this case the word “serve” is devoid of moral meaning. Of course soldiers “serve” their country in the simple sense of doing something at the behest of a government, and in some cases, for the people and institutions of a country. But morally speaking, this service can only be moral if the action in which the soldier is engaged is moral. And further, if the action is not moral, then from a moral point of view, whether it is truly service at all is called into question. This is easy enough to see by way of analogy. In a deeper, moral sense, it is not at all clear that a “mule” truly serves a cocaine dealer after all, just as it seems clear that a person who acquires alcohol for an alcoholic does not, in the end, actually serve the person who suffers from alcoholism. Just as the conceptions of heroism and admiration are called into question as automatically attributed to military personnel, so too, then, is the idea of service.

I should simply add here something that is obvious, yet it can be shocking. Everything I’ve written above is taken matter-of-factly when condemning Nazi or Iraqi soldiers, or those who call themselves soldiers that some others call terrorists. The divorce between personal rational autonomy and engaging in actions at the behest of others is easily seen as a moral problem in these cases. We can easily see how stand-in-line-ism allows despotism and tyranny to grow, and immoral violence to be waged. Yet if we see this with respect to actions and ends with which we disagree, that is no reason for not seeing it as a matter of principle that can be applied to actions and ends with which we might agree.

Lastly, I need only mention that while I have written about warriors above, everything written here has a straightforward applicability to non-combatants who support warriors. That is, persons who directly support war through, say preparing meals, maintaining aircraft, or accounting for expenditures cannot abdicate their own moral agency, and the content of that agency relative to our discussion is identical to what I’ve sketched above. Moreover, non-military citizens have the same responsibility. As I always tell my students, I have blood on my hands too, for, among other reasons, I pay taxes.
What’s at stake here? I can imagine some readers thinking that what is written above makes sense, but that it makes no difference. After all, it might be thought, even if a son or brother, sister or mother, friend or neighbor is, in fact, engaged in a military event I judge to be immoral, I’m certainly not going to say so! It would be “tacky,” rude, and perhaps extremely insensitive to call someone immoral for “serving his country.” I conclude this essay with a thought as to what might be at stake in the discussion above, and why it may, therefore be valuable.

First, simply seeking clarity for clarity’s sake is a philosophic, aesthetic, humane, and for many, a spiritual and theological, value. Humans are communicative beings, and as both rational and moral agents, we should be supremely interested in communicating with one another with a diminishment of illusion, myth, and pretense. Nothing about this communicative aspect of human nature, the human condition, or human values leads to the conclusion that one must become a moralist in the worst sense and make a point of telling people when it seems they are engaged in conceptual confusion, illusion, hypocritical denial, or immoral ignoratio elenchi of any kind.

Second, to the degree that we can become clear about what criteria must obtain in a moral war, we may be motivated to demand moral clarity about potential and actual war, and refuse to cooperate with immoral war. And if it is the case that thinking about the meaning of heroic and honorable acts in connection with war makes the issue more concrete or salient for some people, then, to that degree, they may be willing to become critical evaluators of war with a keener interest in what their conclusions might be. That is to say, no one would want to be considered less than honorable or (at least potentially) heroic while in uniform. Presumably, persons will not, at the least, want to come to such judgments about themselves, regardless of what others may think. Therefore, in thinking about one’s identity and moral character in the first instance, one may come to the conclusion, in the second instance, that any given war may not be morally engaged. This kind of reflective moral decision-making may, in the third instance, have some affect upon the popularity, conduct, length, intensity, or justification of any given war. That is, simply put, wars may be harder to come by if increasing numbers of people think about their moral agency and character in the ways described above.

Of course, this may sound ridiculously utopian and senselessly moralistic. But if war is a grave moral problem, as most agree it is, then any help anywhere that can be mustered to diminish it's hold on anyone, is of inestimable moral value.
NOTES

1 When using the words honor and honorable in this paper, the words admire and admirable can be understood as roughly synonymous.

2 Certainly other virtues evident in a person’s life may motivate the conclusion that he or she is a hero. Patience, for example, comes to mind (it’s not of little consequence that both Aristotle and Aquinas notice that courage and patience are related). But there is no need here to work on details of the relationship between virtues and heroism. We are only noticing the necessary connection between moral notions and heroism, the essential moral nature of the concept of hero.


5 Being “held accountable” for our morality in Christian thought is a matter separate from soteriology, that is, that question of salvation. One is not “saved” due to one’s moral character or behavior, but by “grace,” so “accountability” should not be read so as to affect salvation. The point is that as moral agents, persons are meant to live morally (and it is often noted in the New Testament as to how humankind fails in this regard); further, the fact that we do not live morally signifies our need to be saved, since our immorality is, in part, what condemns us and puts us in need of salvation.


7 Some think that if the JWT were applied seriously, all wars would be understood as unjust. Certainly, the JWT raises the question as to whether there can be just wars, especially in the modern and contemporary worlds. Whether the JWT disallows all wars or only most of them, however, is not material to the observation made in this paper.

8 An exception, I think, applies to medical personnel. While it is true that medically skilled persons heal soldiers who may then go on to kill in an immoral war, healing and life-saving stands on its own, I think, as a virtue. If one has her life saved and goes on to kill immorally, the immorality of that act cannot rebound back to the medics, nurses, or doctors who saved her life. Healing and saving lives are moral activities that stand on their own as such in a way that producing weapons or paying for weapons, say, does not. That is to say, there is nothing intrinsically moral about weapon production, as there is with healing.

9 Another moral problem is introduced here. It is the problem of hypocrisy, and perhaps cowardice. It is hard to escape the conclusion that those who
actively voice their support of any given war, then — if they are of fighting age and health — avoid that same war, are anything other than hypocrites, and perhaps cowards. George W. Bush, when prosecuting a war against Iraq, should have found it morally necessary to encourage his daughters to enlist. All congressional members who voted for that war and speak in support of it, should encourage their fighting-age children to enlist. Of course, it is doubtful that many of these persons have done so, and we know that several of such persons avoided combat themselves, while they spoke in favor of the Vietnam war. This is, of course, to use Aristotelian and Christian language, shameful.