The Ethics Of War Essay, Research Paper

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Jason Bennett Ethics I

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The Ethics of War Discussed

I choose to do my paper on the ethics of war, and plan to discuss the

morality and rules of war. One of the biggest reasons that I chose this topic is

that I was in the Army for a few years, and therefore have some insight and

concern on the subject of war. I do not think that my opinions will be biased

as I can still take an objective look at the arguments, but I do plan to argue

that the morality of war is relative to the situation.

I am generally in agreement with the author’s of the articles in our

textbook, and have read and understand their arguments. In “Morality of

Nuclear Armanent”, Connery discusses when it is and is not permissible to

use nuclear weapons to resolve a conflict. He starts out with several

statements that set the tone for his argument. He says that “Wars of

aggression are always impermissible” and “The only just war is a defensive

war…”. This means that it is never permissible to attack another country,

unless they have attacked or provoked you. Now this could be argued

because there are many situations that I believe would warrant military

aggression, that would not require an actual prior show of force. For

example, the situation in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait during Operation Desert

Storm. Sadam Hussien did not attack the United States, nor did his actions

threaten the lives of U.S. citizens. I strongly believe however, that the U.S.

had every right, if not an obligation to intervene with military force. The U.S.

had economic interests to protect, as well as the defense of a small country

that could not defend itself against the hostile attack.

Connery also discusses the amount and type of force that is

permissible. He says, “In a defensive war, only proportional responses are

permissible to answer aggression. An exception is possible if the enemy is

extraordinarily well-armed and likely to use dis-proportionate force. For

instance, if my enemy were in possession of nuclear bombs which I had good

reason to believe he would use, it would be suicidal for me to choose the

more leisurely precision bombing.” This means that if the situation could be

resolved with a limited display of military force, then it is not necessary or

permissible to exceed this level of aggression in the attack. However, if the

enemy you are facing has superior weapons or is willing to use devastating

force against you, then you are permitted to use whatever actions necessary to

resolve the situation and save your own country.

The majority of Connery’s argument focuses on the morality of waging

indiscriminate warfare on non-combatants, i.e. non-soldiers, civilians. In his

article he says:

Moralists agree that the noncombatant may not be the direct target of

any destructive weapon, large or small. This means that one may

neither deliberately aim his attack at noncombatants nor drop bombs

without distinction on combatants and noncombatants alike. Such

bombing would be contrary to sound moral principles, even if

resorted to only in retaliation.

But granted a sufficiently important military target which could not

be safely eliminated by any less drastic means, nuclear bombing

would be morally justified, even if it involved the resultant loss of a

large segment of the civilian population. It is presumed, of course,

that the good to be achieved is at least equal to the expected damages.

I would tend to agree with this argument, that it would be morally permissible

to bomb civilians as long as the end justifies the means. But what justifies the

merciless slaughter of innocent people? Connery says, “But to be justified,

the loss of civilian life must be unavoidable and balanced by a proportionate

good to the defender.”

This view is not shared by Ford, who in his article “The Hydrogen

Bombing of Cities”, he argues that it is never permissible to kill

noncombatants.

It is never permitted to kill directly noncombatants in wartime. Why?

Because they are innocent. That is, they are innocent of the violent

and destructive action of war, or of any close participation in the

violent and destructive action of war. It is such participation alone

that would make them legitimate targets of violent repression

themselves….they are innocent of the one thing which in our theology

would make them legitimate targets of direct violence, namely violent

war-making, or sufficiently close cooperation in violent war-making.

While Ford makes a strong argument, I do not agree with his position on this

subject. I believe that civilian lives must be spared whenever it is possible to

do so. However, there are going to be situations where doing so would

jeopardize the war effort or cause more casualties than would be spared.

I consider myself somewhat of a utilitarian, so I believe in the greatest

good for the greatest number of people argument. I also believe that this

utilitarian argument is relevant to an “ethics of war” discussion. Obviously, if

dropping a nuclear bomb on an enemy country is going to save more lives in

the long run than would be killed by the bomb, then I would be all for it.

There are, as I said before, going to be discrepancies in each situation. In his

article titled, “The Morality of Using Nuclear Weapons”, Velasquez says:

If the evil of killing the many people that would die in a nuclear

holocaust is greater than the good that would be achieved, then it

would be wrong to use nuclear weapons…If more good than evil

would result, and if no other alternative will produce a greater

balance of good over evil, then it is moral to use such weapons.

I would agree that there are many other relevant criteria that must be

evaluated before I would condone the use of nuclear weapons. However, I

must maintain that under certain circumstances, it would be morally

permissible.

In conclusion, the ethics of war is a very touchy, controversial subject

that would have to be thoroughly evaluated. I do not even pretend to know

who would be qualified to make a decision that would affect so many lives. I

have quoted men who argue strongly against the argument that I support, but

I would have to say that Connery’s position most closely resembles mine. I

was in the Army during the Persian Gulf conflict, and was assigned to an

infantry unit. I know that any one of us in that unit would not have hesitated

to kill enemy soldiers, but I am very glad that I never had to make a choice

concerning civilian lives. I can honestly say that even though I support the

killing of noncombatants when there is no other way, I still don’t know if I

could do it myself.