What can Virtue Ethics Offer Pacifists?

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Any comprehensive introduction to military ethics will reference Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine, and Aquinas. Whatever else you may be told about these thinkers, one or another of them will almost always be credited with founding military ethics as a distinct subfield of moral philosophy. What is less often acknowledged in introductory texts, and indeed in the literature more broadly, is the popularity of virtue among these fathers of military ethics. All of these thinkers, in fact, have been just as influential in the virtue ethical tradition, and their military ethics are in large part distilled from that normative framework.

Yet despite this pedigree, military virtue ethics has also been homogeneously 'warist.' All of the philosophers above accepted at some point that war is (a) morally *evaluable*, and (b) at least sometimes morally *permissible*. The former premise pits these virtue ethicists against what are sometimes called 'amoralists' or 'militarists,' of whom Machiavelli is usually taken to be a paradigmatic example, and the latter claim sets them in opposition to pacifism, both in its contingent and absolutist forms. Thus, virtue ethics has almost always aligned more closely with just war theory, which accepts both (a) and (b). This homogeneity is not, furthermore, a mere quirk of those ethics which came prior to the virtue ethical renaissance which took place halfway through the 20th century. Elizabeth Anscombe, whose 1958 article "Modern Moral Philosophy" sparked the revival of virtue ethics, voiced what I take to be the dominant attitude towards pacifism in contemporary virtue ethics when in her 1961 paper, "War and Murder," she accused the pacifist of "wishful thinking."[1]

Of course, Anscombe does not speak there for *every* virtue ethicist. Quakers, Hutterites, and other pacifists who infuse virtue ethics (or something rather like it) with their theological commitments buck this trend, as do Franco Trivigno in his "A Virtue Ethical Case for Pacifism"[2] and (debatably) William James in his "The Moral Equivalent of War."[3] But contemporary, secular virtue ethicists do not usually engage with pacifism, unless it is to

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[1] In *Moral Problems: A Collection of Philosophical Essays*, ed. James Rachels (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 278.

[2] In *Virtues in Action*, ed. Michael Austin (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[3] *Journal of Peace Psychology* 1, no. 1 (1995).

distance themselves from what they take to be a radical view. Pacifism is essentially *terra nova* for secular virtue ethics. The historical affinity for warism in virtue ethics, of which I take Anscombe's remarks to be representative, coupled with this dearth of sympathetic studies of pacifism from the secular virtue ethical perspective, raises a number of interesting and hitherto unexplored questions. What might that pacifism look like? Is virtue ethical pacifism tenable? Should pacifists prefer a virtue ethical form of pacifism over those of other normative ethics?

This paper does not attempt to answer these questions in full – that would require a monograph. It has instead the more modest aim of illustrating how a virtue ethicist of the dominant neo-Aristotelian variety would likely go about answering the first two, and pinpointing areas where additional work is needed. So in asking what virtue ethics can offer pacifists, I am asking whether and how virtue ethics can provide a theory of pacifism, whether and how it might defeat some common/foreseeable objections, and what additional work needs to be done in order for virtue ethicists to provide a philosophically robust account of pacifism. I thus begin in the first section by translating a pacifist argument from suffering into an argument from the virtue of compassion. There, I maintain that compassionate agents will be highly averse to lethal warfare, and that the virtue ethicist ought therefore to have pacifist leanings. In the second section, I argue that cases for pacifism like this one, which are rooted in individual virtues, cannot constitute a complete argument for pacifism because of the relatively common view that the virtues are unified, and that such an argument will therefore require supplementation in order to be action-guiding. The third section elaborates on what I call the impracticality objection, which is by far the most common objection faced by pacifist philosophers. Any adequate account of pacifism must respond to this objection, and I argue that virtue ethical pacifism is especially vulnerable to it. In the fourth section, I highlight two avenues available to the virtue ethicist who defends pacifism from the impracticality objection. Neither of these avenues is viable without further research, however, so while I insist that virtue ethical pacifism is not defeated by the impracticality objection, I maintain also that this form of pacifism requires further scholarly work in these areas.

1. A Virtue Ethical Approach to Pacifism

Like all other virtue ethical frameworks, Aristotelian virtue ethics is primarily concerned neither with deontic concepts like rules or obligations, nor with consequences or utility, but

with character traits and areteic concepts like virtue and excellence. The character trait is the basic unit of moral analysis for Aristotelian virtue ethicists, encompassing both virtues and vices. A character trait may be defined, more or less, as a deeply entrenched disposition to act, think, and feel in certain ways, for certain sorts of reason. A *virtue* has an additional, areteic feature which distinguishes it from other character traits: it is an excellence of character (and, correspondingly, a vice is a defect in one's character). So a virtue is a deeply entrenched disposition to act, think, and feel in *excellent/good* ways, for *excellent/good* reasons.[4] For Aristotle, the virtues included justice, temperance, courage, friendliness/friendship, honesty, liberality (with money), and magnificence (with regard to money), but almost all contemporary Aristotelians owe some philosophical debts also to Aquinas, who introduced theological virtues like faith to Aristotle's virtue ethics and revised virtues like charity and forgiveness into roughly their contemporary shapes. Consequently, for Annas, Hursthouse, Nussbaum, and most other virtue ethicists since the virtue ethical renaissance, the set includes virtues like charity, mercy, and humility alongside justice, courage, and honesty.

Virtue ethicists derive the moral value of actions from the value of character traits. It is not adherence to absolute rules or the maximisation of utility that determines the moral status of an action, but the agential qualities that the action typifies or manifests. As Aristotle puts it in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, "actions […] are called just and temperate *when they are such as the just and temperate man would do*."[5] Actions are very rarely *inherently* good or bad, because most actions can be performed in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons. Bringing criminals to justice, for instance, is in itself morally neither here nor there because doing so can embody either virtue (e.g. justice) or vice (e.g. vindictiveness). Right action, then, is not a matter of calculating aggregate utility or adhering to universalisable rules, but of acting in ways that are fair, courageous, kind, and so forth. Since the virtuous agent possesses these exemplary character traits their actions are the reference point for right action, so in constructing a virtue ethical pacifism, the task is to show that the virtuous agent would not wage war *and* that this pacifism issues from their character traits.

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[4] See, for excellent defences of this concept of virtue, Julia Annas' *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), *passim*, but particularly Chapter 2, and Parts 1 and 2 of Rosalind Hursthouse's *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[5] Trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1105b5-6. Emphasis added.

1.1. Compassion

In so defending pacifism, virtue ethicists would not need to rely on pacifist literature or the list of considerations pacifists usually appeal to. Trivigno's case for pacifism relies solely on the systematic curtailment of soldiers' prospects for the development of virtue and of achieving *eudaimonia* ('flourishing' or 'happiness'), and could thus be read as a uniquely virtue ethical argument. By contrast, the argument I shall present does not lean on considerations which virtue ethicists alone will be sensitive to, though it can ground such arguments and is, I think, consistent with and supportive of Trivigno's. My strategy, rather, will be to argue that virtue ethicists can co-opt what is to my mind the most forceful argument in the pacifist's arsenal: the argument from suffering. We are, alas, all too familiar with the suffering war brings about. Conflict begets torture, rape, destitution, starvation, displacement, and a whole host of other evils. How then might the virtue ethicist incorporate that suffering into an argument for pacifism?

As I interpret them, appeals to suffering read quite naturally as appeals to compassion, which typically gets defined as a response or a responsiveness to suffering. I say "response or responsiveness" because some philosophers are inclined to treat compassion as a virtue, others as an emotion, and still others as both.[6] I am inclined to think, as are most virtue ethicists working on compassion, that there is room for both accounts of compassion. One the one hand, it is natural to speak of compassionate people and characters, and we can make sense of statements like "the 14th Dalai Lama is compassionate" without knowing anything about the subject's occurrent emotional states. Compassion is one of the 14th Dalai Lama's traits whether he is asleep, overcome with anger, or preoccupied with paperwork. But it is equally natural to say that someone feels compassion without implying anything about their character. Wicked people can and do feel compassion, though of course it may be misdirected, inconsistent, or otherwise warped. It seems to me also that there is a conceptual connection between the virtue of compassion and the emotion of compassion, such that compassion is a virtue of passion, or what Roberts has called an "emotion-virtue."[7] On my account, compassion the virtue has as its sphere compassion the emotion, in the same way that courage has fear as its domain for

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[6] See, for instance, Nussbaum's "Compassion: the Basic Social Emotion," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 13, no. 1 (1996), Maureen Whitebrook's "Compassion as a Political Virtue," *Political Studies* 50, no. 3 (2002), and Brian Carr's "Pity and Compassion as Social Virtues," *Philosophy* 74, no. 289 (1999).

[7] "Aristotle on Virtues and Emotions," *Philosophical Studies* 56, no. 3 (1989): 293.

Aristotle. So to say that someone possesses the virtue of compassion is to say that they are excellently disposed when it comes to this kind of emotional response to suffering.

But what, then, is emotional compassion? As noted above, there is a consensus that emotional compassion is a response to suffering. Compassion also has a negative valence; to feel compassion for a suffering person is not a pleasant feeling. Yet these are broad brush strokes and they do not do a very good job of distinguishing compassion from other emotions in that genus like empathy and pity. So Aristotle and Nussbaum each identify a set of three conditions which they take to be unique to, necessary for, and collectively sufficient for, emotional compassion.[8] These conditions are seriousness, non-desert, and judgements of similar possibilities for Aristotle,[9] and seriousness, non-desert, and eudaimonistic judgements for Nussbaum.[10]

If compassion is to be an emotion-virtue, and it consists in an excellence with respect to feeling compassion, then these necessary and sufficient conditions for emotional compassion ought also to be necessary and sufficient conditions for virtuous (i.e. rightly felt) compassion. Yet it is clear that not every instance of genuine compassion will be virtuous – a conceptual boundary must be maintained between compassion and *fitting* compassion. The key, on my view of compassion, and where compassion becomes a virtue proper, is in determining when those conditions obtain. Non-virtuous agents may feel compassion for the wrong things by misjudging the seriousness of suffering, or by believing falsely that it was deserved. Virtuous compassion, however, is felt *well*. Unless the virtuous agent is misled, lacks information, or encounters some other epistemic impediments for which they are not responsible, they will reliably arrive at a correct assessment of some suffering and will feel compassion rightly. Virtuous compassion will not just involve feelings, however. As Roberts frames it, compassion "adapts or fits a person to function well where another is suffering: to notice the suffering, to feel compassion, *to judge well concerning how to help, and act helpfully*."[11] A virtue is a disposition to act, think, *and* feel in excellent ways, for excellent reasons, and a compassionate person will therefore reliably act on their compassion. To say that someone is compassionate

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[8] Aristotle's *eleos* (ἔλεος) is usually translated as 'pity,' but I side with Nussbaum in thinking that it veers closer to our understanding of compassion.

[9] Derived primarily from the *Rhetoric*.

[10] These conditions appear throughout her corpus, but I take *Upheavals of Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001) to be the classic statement.

[11] *Emotions in the Moral Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 192 (emphasis added).

in the virtuous sense is to say something also about their motivational structure and the reasons on which they will reliably act.

Seriousness

The central question on this picture of compassion, then, is whether the suffering brought about by conflict fulfils these conditions in the virtuous agent's mind. The first condition is not likely to give the pacifist much trouble. According to Aristotle and Nussbaum, we can feel compassion only for serious suffering. Seriousness is scalar; it admits of degrees, and the seriousness of particular evils can be compared because they are in some sense commensurable.[12] Suffering must be sufficiently serious to arouse compassion, and beyond that point the compassion will intensify as the suffering does.

I do not think anybody will sincerely deny that warfare almost always brings about very serious suffering. If any suffering is serious, it will be the suffering that occurs *in bello*. But a defender of warism may, quite rightly, point out that wartime suffering seems to have become much less widespread (and perhaps less serious) in recent years. The advent of precision warfare has gone a long way towards minimising the suffering we see in warzones. Indeed, talk of 'surgical' strikes gives the impression that "collateral damage" is virtually non-existent, and that combatants are taken out quickly and painlessly. This response is especially cogent if, like myself, one is unsure about whether death itself is something that can be suffered, since precision warfare seems to take everything else out of the equation. If death is not included among the things we can suffer, and compassion is framed as a response to suffering, then any form of warfare which kills without inflicting any other pain or evil looks problematic.

Yet the imagery conjured up by talk of precision is misleading, and it is not especially difficult to find cases of extreme suffering in its wake. Drones, for instance, are often touted for their ability to strike targets quickly and cleanly, but they employ notoriously imprecise identification techniques,[13] often injure civilians and medical personnel,[14] and kill in

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[12] See *Upheavals of Thought*, 308, and her references to Adam Smith at 309, 314-315, and 320-321 (noting her use of the term "worst off").

[13] Medea Benjamin makes this point vividly in *Drone Warfare* (London: Verso, 2013), at 27, where she tells us that to drone operators, "a truck carrying boxes of pomegranates can look just like a truck carrying boxes of explosives."

[14] I have in mind here reports of the infamous 'double tap' strikes.

remarkably violent ways.[15] Drone strikes tear families apart, create climates of fear which, in some cases, have brought entire communities to a standstill, and have done so remarkably on a large scale.[16] So it seems fairly clear, upon further inspection, that even precision warfare will meet the Aristotelian seriousness condition.

Non-desert

Both Aristotle and Nussbaum take it that we feel compassion if and only if we also believe that the suffering is wholly undeserved or disproportionate to the agent's fault. Compassion "addresses itself to the nonblameworthy increment,"[17] which is to say that compassion is directed only at sufferings or elements of suffering which do not offset some misconduct. There are at least two discussions to be had here. The first is about whether or not those people who get classified as "collateral damage" are deserving of their suffering. I think, again, that most can agree that no reasonable conception of desert will conclude that those people we usually, and tellingly, refer to as 'innocents' deserve their suffering. And since we do not have any reason to suppose that a (lethal) war can be waged which does not harm innocents,[18] it seems safe to assume that this condition will also be met in the virtuous agent's mind.

There is a trickier discussion to be had over whether combatants deserve the suffering that befalls them. If war inflicts serious suffering on innocents without exception, that discussion will be superfluous, but it is worth noting nevertheless that Nussbaum explicitly allows for compassion even towards the wicked by introducing a two-tiered conception of desert to her theory of compassion.[19] The first tier includes causally immediate desert, but the second employs a more holistic picture of desert. Our choices take place against a backdrop of influences for which we are not always responsible, and when exculpatory factors like bad

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[15] James Cavallaro, Stephan Sonnenberg, and Sarah Knuckey, "Living Under Drones: Death, Injury, and Trauma to Civilians From US Drone Practices in Pakistan," *Stanford Law School*, accessed November 1, 2017, http://law.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/default/files/publication/313671/doc/slspublic/Stanford_NYU_LIVING_UNDER_DRONES.pdf.

[16] The Bureau of Investigative Journalism's data on this is particularly thorough and disquieting. See also Medea Benjamin's "The Grim Toll Drones Take On Innocent Lives," in *Drones and Targeted Killing: Legal, Moral, and Geopolitical Issues*, ed. Marjorie Cohn (Northampton: Olive Branch Press, 2015).

[17] *Upheavals of Thought*, 311.

[18] I say this in view of the studies cited above, but if those are not convincing, consider also Robert Holmes' work on the subject.

[19] *Upheavals of Thought*, 314.

upbringing, trauma, mental illness, and so on figure in the causal chain, they mitigate or eliminate blameworthiness. So there is ample room here to argue over whether combatants themselves actually deserve the suffering they endure in war, particularly in light of the Aristotelian emphasis on the long-lasting effects of upbringing on character.[20]

Similar Possibilities/Eudaimonistic Judgments

The third and final condition is where Aristotle and Nussbaum part company. Aristotle thought that we are only capable of feeling compassion for those whose suffering we ourselves are vulnerable to,[21] but I do not think his account is detailed enough for us to discern whether the virtuous agent would feel compassion for suffering on the other side of the globe. Nussbaum posits a different condition: eudaimonistic judgement, where an agent believes that their *eudaimonia* is threatened or compromised by another's suffering. This looks much more troublesome for the pacifist than the other conditions. *Eudaimonia* is usually taken to refer to a life lived in full; you cannot have led a flourishing life if at the very end you have been tortured to death, nor can you be *eudaimon* if your spouse passes away in an accident, whether or not you come to find closure/contentment afterwards.[22] Yet if we buy into this concept of *eudaimonia*, it looks as though only the suffering of our nearest and dearest can be the object of compassion, since no stranger is likely to have an actual or non-trivial impact on our flourishing. But this, surely, is an unacceptable conclusion, and Nussbaum agrees. Nussbaum criticises compassion which is, in her words, "not only narrow, failing to include the distant, but also polarizing, dividing the world into an 'us' and a 'them.'"[23] She asserts that compassion should be extended to deliver "a larger sense of the humanity of suffering," which involves "a vivid sense of the real losses and needs of others."[24] So there seems to be space for compassion towards the victims of war on this picture.[25]

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[20] See, for instance, Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VII of the *Politics*, and Miles Burnyeat's "Aristotle on Learning to be Good," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amelie Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

[21] See his *Rhetoric*, in *Aristotle: The Complete Works*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, electronic ed. (Charlottesville: Princeton University Press, 1992), 1386a4-1386a16.

[22] See Chapter IX of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

[23] "Compassion and Terror," *Daedalus* 132, no. 1 (2003): 13.

[24] *Upheavals of Thought*, 26.

[25] If these arguments are not satisfying, one could also argue that a leader's causal proximity to warfare makes the suffering much more significant for an evaluation of his or her life as a whole, or one might tie a leader's living

If these thoughts hold water, then we have anchored a conclusion that many non-philosophers would likely find commonsensical: the virtuous agent feels compassion for the victims of war, and is motivated by that compassion to avoid warfare where possible. Assuming that it withstands scrutiny, an argument such as this could therefore be used as a cornerstone for a virtue ethical argument for pacifism.

2. The Unity of the Virtues

A virtue ethicist who chooses to argue for pacifism in this way will encounter a number of hurdles, two of which will occupy us for the remainder of this paper. The first is that an argument such as the one above cannot in this instance account for *right action*, because action guidance in virtue ethics cannot be obtained by the study of a single virtue. If you think, as most virtue ethicists do, that the virtues are unified in such a way that they can curb, override, silence, or otherwise interfere with one another, then it will be necessary to examine a *constellation* of virtues in order to decipher right action.

The issue here is that each virtue involves a sensitivity to different reasons for and against particular courses of action. Compassion, I have argued, involves sensitivity and responsiveness to suffering. But the virtue ethical warist can concede that compassion speaks against warfare without thereby committing herself to pacifism, because she can point to other virtues which supply reasons in favour of waging war.[26] Justice, the warist might say, requires us to wage war because leaders owe it to their citizenry to keep them safe from harm and to bring those who threaten or attack them to trial. The warist might also turn to charity or beneficence in the case of humanitarian wars, claiming for instance that one cannot possibly stand by as innocents are massacred. Each of these arguments would introduce reasons for action which conflict with the reasons delivered by compassion, and since the virtuous agent must weigh those reasons for action against one another in deciding which of the mutually

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well to how well they do their job, and how well they do their job to how much suffering they bring about, both of which seem plausible to me.

[26] Of course, warists typically will not concede this. Warists have often argued that waging war is the more compassionate thing to do in particular circumstances. In appealing to reasons related to suffering, the debate becomes internal to compassion, but the problem remains rooted in reason-responsiveness.

exclusive courses of action to adopt,[27] the pacifist cannot claim to have deciphered right action without first considering the other virtues in play.

The unity thesis is not going to be problematic every time we attempt to use a single virtue to generate action guidance. Some actions, such as paying one's debts or donating to charity, are typically the domain of just one virtue, and in those cases the other virtues will not need to be considered. War, however, is clearly not the domain of one virtue in particular, and this ought to be especially obvious to the pacifist who seeks to enlist compassion, because Aristotle and Nussbaum have both built desert into their accounts thereof. On their view, to say that compassion motivates or causes a virtuous agent to abhor war is to make a judgment about justice. The unity of the virtues is also not troublesome where all reasons will foreseeably point to the same action, nor will it cause concern when we know that the reasons for an alternative course of action will be trivial. But again, it seems clear that warfare is not usually an area where all of the reason-giving considerations (foreseeably) point to the same course of action, nor, in my view, can the warist's reasons for waging war be dismissed as trivial. The virtue ethicist will therefore have to look deeper into other the relevant virtues in order to defend pacifism.

The unity thesis does not topple the argument presented in §1, and it cannot by itself topple virtue ethical pacifism. It merely prevents the virtue ethical pacifist from deriving action guidance from any one virtue. So it is entirely possible that the other virtues will side with compassion, particularly at this stage, where we are constructing a theory of pacifism and have yet to run up against warist objections and dilemmas. Indeed, justice seems likely to speak against war. I shall not get into tendentious debates over the nature of justice here, but I do not think that is be necessary, because it seems eminently plausible to me to say that the suffering of innocents in war is a *paradigm* of injustice, such that any account of justice must acknowledge that suffering or the infliction of it as in some way unjust. Another duo of virtues, forgiveness and mercy, seem also to temper justice, such that even if a war is just or fair in some sense, it is not necessarily the morally right course of action on balance. Forgiveness and mercy are perhaps most relevant when it comes to punitive wars, which have gone out of fashion since the Medieval period, but we can also expect them to figure prominently in analyses of civil wars and wars which are grossly asymmetrical. Charity, a fourth virtue, also speaks against war, and indeed Aquinas acknowledges this in the *Summa Theologiae*, where

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[27] *Natural Goodness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), Chapter 4.

he writes that "charity, according to its very nature, causes peace."[28] So compassion is probably not alone in condemning war. Still, we cannot simply assert that the virtues speak in unison here. A convincing argument for pacifism requires further scholarship to identify the relevant virtues and to apply them to this issue.

3. The Impracticality Objection

By far the most common objection to pacifism is presented by just war theorists like Walzer, Orend, and McMahan, and accepts that war is undesirable despite the good it may bring about. The concern, instead, is that international politics, often regarded as a realm of *Realpolitik* and Machiavellian 'amorality,' is a far cry from the pacifist's 'lofty' ideal of lasting peace. War is an inevitable product of ineradicable features of the world, and as a result, "the non-violent world imagined by the pacifist is not actually attainable, at least for the foreseeable future."[29] This argument has been reiterated *ad nauseam*, and has an impressive lineage. John Rawls regarded pacifism as "an unwordly view"[30] for this reason, and this is the chief argument deployed by Walzer in both *Arguing About War* and in the afterword of *Just and Unjust Wars*.[31] Tom Regan suggests that pacifism "lacks a fully developed moral sensitivity to the vagaries and complexities of human existence,"[32] and in George Hartmann's survey of American philosophers, ethicists of all stripes objected to pacifism on the grounds that, in essence, "it is non-realistic, fails to face the facts, and relies upon a sentimental wish to believe the loveliest things about Man."[33]

Many warists leave the argument here, but this is a vague way of expressing doubts about how realistic pacifism's prospects are. I think, in fact, that we can identify at least two subspecies of this objection. The warists who have explored it in greater detail appear to fall into two distinct but not mutually exclusive camps that waxed and waned at different times:

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[28] Trans. English Dominican Fathers (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1912-36), II-II, Q29, A3, Rep 3. Aquinas is at pains to stress this thought, since he repeats it at least twice more in the question immediately following, and once more at II-II, Q40, A2, Rep 3.

[29] Orend, *The Morality of War* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2006), 249.

[30] *A Theory of Justice*, revised ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 335, though this argument appears to be primarily directed towards absolute pacifists.

[31] See *Arguing About War*, 13-14, and *Just and Unjust Wars*, 329-335.

[32] "A Defense of Pacifism," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 2, no. 1 (1972): 86.

[33] "The Strength and Weakness of the Pacifist Position as Seen by American Philosophers," *The Philosophical Review* 53, no. 2 (1944): 129.

those who believe that war is a corollary of human nature (generally, the earlier critics), and those who believe that warfare is not necessarily a product of human nature, but is nevertheless inevitable because of the structure of the international system (generally, the later critics). The second version is a preferable quarry for several reasons, the most compelling of which being its present popularity and its avoidance of an unnecessary weakness by foregoing contentious claims about human nature.[34]

In sum, the objection is that the anarchic international system confronts leaders with moral dilemmas, and sometimes war is the morally best option on offer. The international community is made up of countless actors whose actions we cannot control, and these actors sometimes choose to make war. In Martin Benjamin's words, when those actors do make war, "there is no plausible way to defend a nation's security apart from the actual or threatened infliction of bodily harm."[35] "Defending the nation," then, imposes an ultimatum: we either kill or be killed. But if we must sometimes take lives to spare our own lives (or the lives of others), the pacifist who abhors suffering seems stuck at an impasse. Whether they choose to kill or not, someone will be killed, and it is presumably morally preferable that the attacker be killed instead of the victim. So, the objection goes, pacifism is untenable in situations where the pacifist is forced to choose between allowing innocents to be killed and actively killing belligerents. Since scenarios like these do actually occur, we ought to reject both absolute and contingent pacifism and embrace an ethic which allows us (a) to defend ourselves and others, and (b) to rein in the wars we choose to pursue.

What the warist taps into, in pressing this objection, is a fairly standard tragic lemma. Tragic lemmas (and they are usually *di*lemmas) are, in brief, situations where there are no morally unblemished courses of action available. All options are 'stained,' in that they bring some evil to pass. The lemma as it appears in warist discourses is not usually *irresolvable*, since it is supposed to be glaringly obvious that there is a course of action, lethal warfare, which is preferable over the alternatives.[36] But it is a lemma insofar as there is a forced choice between mutually exclusive options, and a tragic one because none of the possible choices are unequivocally good. For most warists, there are scores of tragic dilemmas where lethal warfare is the morally preferable solution, the most clear-cut being cases of self-defence and

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[34] George Stratton's "Human Nature and War," *The Scientific Monthly* 23, no. 1 (1926) also develops an objection to this argument which is, to my mind, especially well-reasoned.
[35] "Pacifism for Pragmatists," *Ethics* 83, no. 3 (1973): 197.
[36] See, for a detailed examination of tragic and irresolvable dilemmas in virtue ethics, Chapter 3 of Hursthouse's *On Virtue Ethics*.

humanitarian intervention. It is evident, the warist says, that in cases such as Nazi Germany or Gaddafi's Libya, sitting idly by as innocents, either in one's own state or in another's, die is morally worse than killing aggressors. So the pacifist is mistaken in thinking that all actual wars have or had morally preferable alternatives, and is guilty of ignoring the existence of real dilemmas.

3.1. Tragic Lemmas in Virtue Ethical Warism

It is something like the impracticality objection that Aristotle and Aquinas seem to have buckled under when they endorsed war as a virtuous activity. Aristotle and Aquinas permitted war because they thought it was a necessary evil, not because they thought that war was desirable. Aristotle made it very clear that war was not an end *per se* but was a means to some other end. In Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he lists war among those things we undertake for the purpose of obtaining some good, namely peace:

> happiness seems to depend on leisure, because we work to have leisure, and wage war to live in peace […] no one chooses to make war, or even starts a war, for the sake of making war […] so, among actions performed in accordance with virtue, those in politics and war are distinguished by their nobility and extent, but they involve exertion, aim at some end, and are not worthy of choice for their own sake.[37]

Here, Aristotle is not making a case for the claim that war is *good*, but is subscribing to the view that war is at times *required*, and drawing normative insights from virtue ethics about right action in the bellicose political climate of ancient Greece.

We find the same resignation in Aquinas' writings. In the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas sides with Augustine (and Aristotle) in thinking that peace is the ultimate goal of warfare:

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[37] 1177b4-17. This conclusion is repeated at the outset of Book I (1094a1-18), where Aristotle lists war among the activities which are not desirable in themselves, but only insofar as they contribute towards some other end. At 1117b7-16, Aristotle adds that:

> Death and wounds will be painful for the courageous person, and he will face them involuntarily, but he will stand his ground against them because it is noble, or shameful not to. And the more he is possessed of virtue as a whole and the happier he is, the more pain he will feel at the thought of death. For life is especially worth living for a person like this, and he knows that he is losing the greatest goods - and this is painful. But he is no less courageous for that, and is perhaps even more so, because he chooses what is noble in war at the cost of these goods.

those who wage war justly aim at peace, and so they are not opposed to peace, except to the evil peace, which Our Lord "came not to send upon earth." Hence Augustine says: "We do not seek peace in order to be at war, but we go to war that we may have peace. Be peaceful, therefore, in warring, so that you may vanquish those whom you war against, and bring them to the prosperity of peace."[38]

Tragic lemmas of the sort we find in statements of the impracticality objection are thus a serious problem for virtue ethical pacifism. Not only have they deterred philosophers and non-philosophers alike from pacifism in all its forms, they seem also to have swayed the two most influential philosophers in the tradition.

4. Two Solutions

The defender of virtue ethical pacifism has at least two options here. The first is to argue that the impracticality objection fails because the warist's lemma or lemmas are merely apparent, and the second is to claim that the lemma or lemmas are genuine, but that the impracticality objection fails nonetheless because the virtuous agent will never opt for war anyway. I shall discuss each of these options in turn.

4.1. Tragic Lemmas and Practical Wisdom

Virtue ethics might in fact fare better than other normative theories with respect to the first option, that a given lemma is merely apparent, because virtue ethicists have spent so much of their history developing intellectual virtues which are aimed in part at defusing lemmas. Aristotle identified two intellectual virtues, one of which, *phronesis* ('practical wisdom'), enables the virtuous agent to act rightly even in the most challenging situations.[39] As a virtue, *phronesis* involves the exercise of reason and deliberation *par excellence*. *Phronesis* does not deliberate about ends, however – those are, on Aristotle's account, supplied by virtues of

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[38] II-II, Q40, A1, Rep 3.

[39] Aristotle treats *phronesis* throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but the most relevant sections for our discussion are Books II and III.

character like friendship and courage. Rather, *phronesis* deliberates excellently about means to ends. The *phronimos* ('practically wise man') is thus especially adept at navigating difficulties that crop up *en route* to their objectives. So, since compassion supplies the avoidance of suffering as one of those ends, it could be argued that the virtuous agent would be capable of avoiding the lemmas other leaders have succumbed to, and that those lemmas are thus illusory.[40]

The claim that virtuous leaders would be capable of defusing many of the conflicts we see today is not a farfetched one. Recent developments in the Middle East, Europe, and Asia suggest that leaders with practical wisdom could fare much better than some that are currently in office. The difficulty with this solution, however, is that to rescue virtue ethical pacifism, the argument will need to amount to a denial of the existence of genuine moral lemmas. To say that a virtuous agent is capable of finding a non-lethal way out of *every* lemma posed by the warist is just to say that there are no lemmas in this sphere of life at all. This is an empirical claim, and it is one that I could not hope to assess adequately here. Such a claim would require a thorough study of apparent lemmas (at least, those in the present), and a persuasive case for the non-existence of them all. As far as I am aware, no work of that sort has appeared in the literature, though of course there are numerous ongoing debates between philosophers, historians, political scientists, and other experts about the existence of particular lemmas. That said, it is worth noting that no secular virtue ethicist has, to my knowledge, argued against the existence of genuine lemmas. Secular virtue ethicists seem, in fact, to be rather open to the idea of a world fraught with genuine lemmas.[41] So while the veracity of this argument is ultimately an empirical matter, the willingness amongst secular virtue ethicists to admit many lemmas does not bode well for the virtue ethical pacifist who hopes to deny their existence, even if it is only in this particular sphere of life.

4.2. Virtue, Rules, and the Conceptually Verdictive

The second line of argument, which accepts that lemmas do exist but maintains that the virtuous agent would never opt for war anyway, could also be defended by appeal to commonly

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[40] It ought to be noted here that *phronesis* has gained traction among both consequentialists and deontologists, and that virtue ethical discussions of *phronesis* are thus potentially relevant to pacifists of those sorts.

[41] See, for example, Part I of Hursthouse's *On Virtue Ethics*.

held tenets of neo-Aristotelianism. One might at first think that virtue ethics will not be particularly hospitable to this strategy, since virtue ethics is widely thought to be 'particularistic' or 'uncodifiable,' in the sense that it does not cordon off particular actions as wrong in themselves like deontology does. Virtue ethics is not in the business of providing, as Hursthouse puts it, an "algorithm for life."[42] But despite some recent controversy, it is not true that virtue ethicists are incapable of categorically ruling out particular actions. Indeed, Aristotle argued that his normative theory was able to proscribe adultery, theft, and homicide in Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and Philippa Foot prohibits torture in Chapter 5 of *Natural Goodness*. Yet in defending these moral 'absolutes,' Aristotle and Foot are not violating anticodifiability and they are not attempting to provide an algorithm for life. Rather, they are acknowledging the flexibility and variety of our moral lexicon. Both Foot and Aristotle recognise that some descriptors are "immediately connected with depravity,"[43] or are "conceptually verdictive."[44] Our moral language is such that certain act-types entail or correlate reliably with certain states of character. It is incontrovertibly cruel to torture puppies for pleasure, for instance, and *merely performing* this action reveals a flaw in one's character. If the pacifist can show that war is similarly verdictive, they will be able to show that the virtuous agent would never wage war, and that waging war is never morally right even granting the existence of warist lemmas.

Yet this strategy requires a lengthy set up, and will have to overcome several difficulties. It is one thing to allow for categorical prohibitions, but quite another to show that warfare is one of those prohibited actions. Indeed, there are several reasons to think that most virtue ethicists will not treat warfare as conceptually verdictive *tout court*. The most obvious is that they have not done so already. None of the virtue ethicists who speak of absolute prohibitions list war as one of them, and it would be implausible to treat this as a mere oversight. Aristotle returns to warfare so often in his corpus that he cannot have forgotten to alert us if he thought it was conceptually verdictive, and a feeling of revulsion towards warfare, particular World War II, motivated much of Foot's work in moral philosophy, so she too would likely have informed us if she thought that warfare was conceptually verdictive.

A second reason is that war is not nearly so widely abhorred as the actions that virtue ethicists have identified as conceptually verdictive. Adultery, theft, homicide, and torture have

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[42] *On Virtue Ethics*, 54.
[43] *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1107a10.
[44] *Natural Goodness*, 78.

already been admitted, and we could add many other actions to this list – bullying, rape, racism, gossiping, and stalking all seem conceptually verdictive. But this intuition is only as forceful as it is ubiquitous. It will not be provocative to suggest that any morally decent person will be disappointed to find that their child had bullied a classmate, or that a family member was guilty of rape. Warfare, on the other hand, does not usually achieve such unanimity. To be sure, particular weapons, tactics, and strategies are sometimes taken to be beyond the moral pale, as are wars undertaken for certain ends (such as punitive wars), but weapons such as sticky foam and wars fought for humanitarian ends certainly will not achieve a similar consensus. What's more, such wars and tactics are exactly where the warist digs their heels in and declares that pacifists are deeply mistaken about what morality requires. But if we assume, as I think we ought to, that warists are not typically wicked and do not have broken moral compasses, then we cannot simply proclaim that war is conceptually verdictive without giving their viewpoint due consideration. This is not to say that they are correct and that war is *not* directly linked with vice, but it is, I think, more than sufficient to show that that conclusion needs to be examined carefully.

Of course, it is not impossible that virtue ethicists and warists have failed to appreciate a conceptual connection between waging war and vice. Foot, after all, ruled out torture because she viewed it as "the ultimate negation of the impulse humans have to come to each other's aid,"[45] and there are valid questions to be raised about whether and why that reasoning does not generalise to preclude wars of various sorts, whether war counts as the "ultimate negation" of some other virtue, and so forth. Answers to these questions cannot be defended adequately here, and it is noteworthy both that any attempt to analogise warfare with torture will have to contend with the usual run of analogies warists use to defend their military ethics, particularly the analogy with self-defence, and that Foot's justification for prohibiting torture may well work in the warist's favour, since it could easily be employed to defend humanitarian wars. So it is best to suspend judgment here once again, since we cannot yet say whether this second line of argument will prove useful to the virtue ethicist who hopes to defend pacifism. Again, we require further analysis.

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[45] *Natural Goodness*, 78 (n.21).

Conclusion

Mainstream virtue ethics has to make up a lot of ground. Deontologists and consequentialists have access to a plethora of nuanced accounts and defences of pacifism, and virtue ethicists have a great deal of work to do in order to match them. I have not set out to present a comprehensive theory of virtue ethical pacifism, nor to present a full defence of such pacifism from warist objections. My intent, instead, has been to trace the contours of one virtue ethical approach to pacifism, to anticipate some objections that it might run up against, and to suggest some options available to its advocates. If, as I suggested earlier, this skeleton of virtue ethical pacifism complements and can be fleshed out by the small body of existing work on virtue ethical pacifism, then a broader theory of virtue ethical pacifism may be taking shape. But virtue ethics is still a long way away from being able to offer pacifists an account of pacifism which rivals that of deontology or consequentialism in sophistication and cogency. The impracticality objection will have to be answered, and both *phronesis* and conceptual verdictives will have to be discussed at length in order to secure support for the pacifist's conclusions. I hope, nevertheless, to have shown that virtue ethical pacifism warrants further consideration, and that it could potentially offer as much as other normative ethics.

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