Introduction: Ethics, Experience, and War

Cian O'Driscoll and Sian Troath

If your pictures are not any good, the celebrated war photographer Robert Capa is reputed to have said, it is probably because you are not standing close enough.[1] Might the same logic apply to the task of thinking ethically about war? This special section, featuring contributions from scholars across a range of disciplinary and academic backgrounds, explores this question. It asks what we, as scholars of ethics and international affairs, stand to learn about the ethics of war by engaging with the experience of war. What can those who have first-hand experience of armed conflict—combatants and noncombatants alike—teach ethics of war scholars about the rights and wrongs of war that we would otherwise overlook? And to what degree does what they have to teach us comport with, depart from, or perhaps even challenge, the standard just war framework scholars employ to talk about the ethics of war?

The literary scholar and World War II veteran Paul Fussell provides an excellent framing of the proposition that ethics of war scholars should do more to engage the experience of war. In war as in life, he argued in his provocative 1981 essay "Thank God for the Atom Bomb," experience is the greatest teacher.[2] People who have never been to war can only know so much about it. Whatever they say about the rights and wrongs of war should, for this reason, be taken with a hefty pinch of salt. "I don't demand that he experience having his ass shot off," Fussell writes disdainfully of one such observer, "I merely note that he didn't."[3] We can learn more about war, Fussell contends, by listening to the young men and women who have seen it

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up close and personal.[4] Their testimonies, he argues, furnish a sometimes uncomfortable but always necessary counterpoint to the "rationalistic abstraction from reality" that armchair theorists are wont to produce.[5] And although Fussell does not deny the utility of the latter, he is adamant that it must be supplemented by and tested against reference to "real world experience."[6]

Others would go considerably further than Fussell. On this view, sometimes referred to as "combat Gnosticism," only those who have known war first-hand are qualified to speak about it.[7] Unsurprisingly, this view has a certain amount of currency among former soldiers.[8] The claim that people who have lived experience of war are best placed to comment on the ethical issues can be formulated in crude but also sophisticated ways. If the crude version reduces to the apocryphal veteran's mantra "You had to be there," the refined version recognizes the link between the particularities of our lived experiences and the differentiated insights they afford us. In simple terms, some people are susceptible to acquiring a deeper understanding of certain dimensions of social life because of the role they play in them and the positions they occupy. Who better to understand war, on this logic, than the people who do it and have it done to them.[9] This is standpoint epistemology extended to the ethics of war.[10]

Many scholars will rightly blanche at these remarks. It is reasonable to worry, for example, that people who have suffered combat are unlikely to be the best judges of right and wrong in war. Compromised by their personal histories, they lack the critical distance required to make clear-eyed ethical calls. Too emotionally invested, potentially too complicit, and perhaps even too traumatized, they might even be regarded as the last people scholars interested in the ethics of war should be consulting. They may have war stories to tell, but these stories should not be confused with morality tales, and do not necessarily indicate ethical acuity.[11] On this view, personal experience of war can be an impediment rather than an aid to cogent ethical thinking about war. What is interesting for present purposes is that this approach, which arguably predominates contemporary just war theorizing, assumes that the exposure to experience will contaminate, not benefit, our efforts to think ethically about war.[12] This is a valid concern, and most scholars would readily concede that the processes of detachment and abstraction serve a useful purpose where moral reasoning is involved. They enable us to look beyond the particularity of our own lives and to reflect on matters in an impartial, dispassionate, and putatively objective manner.[13]

Yet there is also a problem with this way of proceeding. Namely, it excises the human element from the ethics of war. By bracketing the lived experience of

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combat from the task of thinking ethically about war, scholars risk losing contact with the bloody realities of violent conflict, and, consequently, speaking past the very people they should be addressing: those "for whom war is a primary subject and personal experience."[14] The danger arising from this is that our attempts to think ethically about war will necessarily become too theoretical or abstract, too remote from the "realities of warfare," and ultimately too bloodless to serve any practical purpose.[15] If we wish to avoid this outcome, and to instead ensure that our ethical thinking connects in a meaningful and action-guiding way to the realities of combat, it follows that we must engage with, rather than insulate ourselves from, the lived experience of war.

How might we do this? Is there a path between the insularity of combat gnosticism and the esotericism of contemporary ethics of war scholarship? The articles gathered in this special section address this challenge. Rather than resolve the issues at stake, however, they highlight the complexities involved. Cian O'Driscoll argues that incorporating the experience of war into just war theory via the medium of war memoirs will help to better account for the complexities and ambiguities of combat. Thomas Gregory, Craig Jones, Helen M. Kinsella, Nisha Shah, and Lina Aburas explore the role of counting civilian casualties through the example of the civilian harm assessments produced during operations in Syria and Iraq from 2014–2018, drawing out the contestations inherent in numerical indicators of harm, including what is missed relating to experiencing the harms of war. Jessica Wolfendale challenges the centering of belligerent perspectives in just war theory, arguing that it has contributed to harms against civilians, as seen in drone warfare and the war in Gaza, and therefore the perspectives of noncombatant civilians need to be foregrounded and normatively prioritized in academic, policy, and legal analyses of war. Sian Troath argues that the intellectual inheritances of AI and machine learning interact with ideas about the ethics of war in ways that relegate the experience of war to the background, encouraging the dehumanization and expansion of war through a shared belief in technology's capacity to serve as a silver bullet able to solve the ethical conundrums of war. Finally, Beth Rowan introduces the concept of experiential institutionalization to explore how actors embedded within legal-bureaucratic systems confront the moral inadequacy of the formal rules governing civilian harm in ways that can generate institutional change by tracing the history of the U.S. JAGs, from the aftermath of WWII through to the War on Terror.

On the one hand, the basic sense of the observation that people with experience of combat zones may have something to teach us about the ethics of war is self-

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evident. It would be foolish to ignore their voices. And yet, it seems, this is exactly what ethics of war scholars have been inclined to do.[16] There is an argument, therefore, for correcting this oversight, and factoring the experience of people who have lived through combat into how we think ethically about war. On the other hand, we have reason to be skeptical of the suggestion that ethics of war scholars should defer to the insider perspective of participants in armed conflict or regard it as a higher mode of knowledge. Ethics of war scholars may have no experience of war, but, because of this, they can bring a certain critical distance to the discussion of the ethical issues that it raises. Their vantage point affords them—that is, us—a wider field of vision and an ability to see certain things more clearly than people on the battlefield can. Where, then, does this leave us? Viewed as a whole, the articles that follow challenge ethics of war scholars to engage with the question of how they might factor the lived experience of conflict into their work in a way that engages rather than yields to it.

Notes

[1] Robert Capa, *Slightly Out of Focus* (New York: Modern Library, 2001).

[2] Paul Fussell, *Thank God for the Atom Bomb and Other Essays* (New York: Summit Books, 1988), p. 14.

[3] Ibid., p. 18. Fussell later (p. 44) directs a similar barb at Michael Walzer in a rebuttal of the latter's critical response to Fussell's essay.

[4] Fussell is of course equating the experience of war with the experience of soldiers. However, it is possible to construe the experience of war in a more expansive, inclusive manner, one that includes the perspectives of noncombatants exposed to conflict. See the article by Jessica Wolfendale in this special section for a case in point: Jessica Wolfendale, "Collateral Voices: Civilian Perspectives, Moral Injury, and the Ethics of War," *Ethics & International Affairs* 40, no. 1 (Spring 2026).

[5] Fussell, *Thank God for the Atom Bomb and Other Essays*, p. 19.

[6] Ibid., p. 14.

[7] James Campbell, "Combat Gnosticism: The Ideology of First World War Poetry," *New Literary History* 30, no. 1 (Winter 1999), pp. 203–15. See also Kate McLoughlin, *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 42; and Lynne Hanley, *Writing War: Fiction, Gender, and Memory* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), p. 134.

[8] See, for example, John-Paul Jordan, *Joys of War: From the Foreign Legion, the SAS, and into Hell with PTSD* (Yorkshire, Pa.: Pen & Sword Military, 2018), p. ix; Chris Kyle, *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. Military History* (New York: William Morrow, 2012), p. 299; and Marcus Luttrell, *Lone Survivor: The Incredible True Story of Navy SEALs under Siege* (London: Sphere, 2014), pp. 35–38.

[9] Christine Sylvester, *War as Experience: Contributions from International Relations and Feminist Analysis* (Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, 2013), p. 1. See also Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), p. 150.

[10] On standpoint epistemology, see Sandra Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is 'Strong Objectivity?'," *Centennial Review* 36, no. 3 (Fall 1992), pp. 437–70.

[11] Consider the remarks of a war veteran and writer: "In a true war story, if there's a moral at all, it's like the thread that makes the cloth. You can't tease it out. You can't extract the meaning without unravelling the deeper meaning. And in the end, really, there's nothing much to say about a true war story, except maybe 'Oh'." Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (London: 4th Estate, 1990), p. 75.

[12] Experience, we might say, falls within the category of "irrelevant details that can distract or confuse our intuitions" that, following Jeff McMahan, many scholars have sought to "filter out" of their analysis. See Jeff McMahan, "Torture and Method in Moral Philosophy," in Scott Anderson and Martha Nussbaum, eds., *Confronting Torture: Essays on the Ethics, Legality, History, and Psychology of Torture Today*

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(Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2018), p. 197. See also Helen Frowe, *The Ethics of War and Peace: An Introduction* (Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, 2011), p. 2. For analysis, see Mathias Thaler, *Naming Violence: A Critical Theory of Genocide, Torture, and Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), p. 99. The argument has elsewhere been made that the whole thrust of modern political thought has been toward an anti-experiential point of view. See Edward S. Reed, *The Necessity of Experience* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 7–8.

[13] Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 197.

[14] Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 5th ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2015), p. 95. See also "A Conversation with Michael Walzer," YouTube video, 32:37, from a conversation between Nancy Rosenblum and Michael Walzer, posted by Annual Reviews, www.youtube.com/watch?v=TvpnmmLoO38.

[15] Chris Brown, "Revisionist Just War Theory and the Impossibility of a Moral Victory," in Andrew R. Hom, Cian O'Driscoll, and Kurt Mills, eds., *Moral Victories: The Ethics of Winning Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 85–101, at p. 86.

[16] Notable exceptions: Toni Erskine, *Embedded Cosmopolitanism: Duties to Strangers and Enemies in a World of "Dislocated Communities"* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Annika Bergman Rosamond and Annica Kronsell, "Cosmopolitanism and Individual Ethical Reflection—the Embodied Experiences of Swedish Veterans," *Critical Military Studies* 8, no. 2 (2020), pp. 159–78; and Marcus Schulzke, *Pursuing Moral Warfare: Ethics in American, British, and Israeli Counterinsurgency* (Washington, D.C,: Georgetown University Press, 2019).

Abstract: What would it mean to put the ethics of war in dialogue with the experience of war? The special section that follows explores this question. Featuring contributions from scholars across a range of disciplinary and academic backgrounds, it asks what we, as scholars of ethics and international affairs, stand to learn about the ethics of war by engaging with the experience of war. What can those who have direct personal experience of armed conflict—combatants and noncombatants alike—teach ethics of war scholars about the moral issues raised by war that we might otherwise miss or fail to appreciate? And to what degree does what they have to teach us comport with, depart from, or perhaps even challenge the standard just war framework scholars employ to talk about the ethics of war? This short introductory essay frames this special section by introducing the questions it tackles and the essays that comprise it.

Keywords: Just War Theory, ethics of war, experience, standpoint, soldiers, noncombatants

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