Introduction: Is a Military Really Worth Having?

Peter Balint

Virtually all countries in the world have a standing military. Most of us simply assume that this is a necessary part of protecting ourselves and our way of life from potential enemies. Some of us may be "anti-war" or worry that too much money is spent on the military, but most of us still assume that without a standing military we would be less safe in what, despite emerging norms and institutions, is still an anarchical international realm. But do we actually need a standing military establishment? Do the risks (for example, of a coup) outweigh the benefits of having one? Are there ethically better ways of organizing such a force? These questions have been overlooked in the ethics of war and conflict, which has instead focused on two questions. First, under what circumstances is it morally permissible for a state to resort to military force? This is the question of *jus ad bellum*, the justice *of* a war. Second, once hostilities are underway, how should combatants conduct themselves? This is the question of *jus in bello*, justice *in* war. While an examination of justice *after* war (*jus post bellum*) has more recently begun—for example, looking at postwar relations, reconstruction, and reparations—a full picture of the ethics of war and conflict requires us also to look in the opposite direction and address questions of *jus ante bellum*, or justice *before* war. These questions are not about whether war making is justified, but about whether war building is justified and in what ways. Without looking at jus ante bellum, our understanding of the ethics of war and conflict is obscured.

While a great deal continues to be written about the costs of war making, little philosophical attention is paid to the costs of war building. As Cheyney Ryan puts it, "The great shortcoming of received thinking is to focus on the first to the

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exclusion of the second."[1] To its credit, the United Nations has tried to remedy this neglect. A key recommendation arising out of its First Special Session on Disarmament in 1978 is that all governments should "prepare assessments of the nature and magnitude of the short and long-term economic and social costs attributable to their military preparations, so that the general public can be informed of them."[2] This symposium addresses this neglected and important aspect of the ethics of war. The contributors use Ned Dobos's *Ethics, Security, and the War-Machine: The True Costs of the Military* as a starting point.[3] Dobos's recent book is the first to make a serious attempt at examining the question of jus ante bellum. He investigates the moral, social, and cultural costs associated with maintaining a standing army, and argues that these costs are so significant that they are likely to be prohibitive in some cases. He argues that war building might not be justified even if war making sometimes is, and so he separates the question of militarism from pacifism.

Ethics, Security, and the War-Machine

Dobos's main claim is that we have not sufficiently calculated the true (noneconomic) costs of the military, and that if we did, having a standing defense force would begin to not seem like as good an idea. In short, Dobos pushes us to reflect on something we have taken for granted: that one of the biggest institutions in our society, which is supposed to keep us safe and make it possible for us to lead our lives unencumbered by the precarity of Hobbesian anarchy, may in fact pose great dangers and risks to us physically, morally, and culturally. These risks and dangers may be so acute, argues Dobos, that in many cases we should rethink the wisdom of having a military *at all*. This pushes the burden of proof onto those who defend the military to show why such dangers are acceptable. Otherwise, the existence of the military cannot be justified. In asking these provocative questions, Dobos opens up a new area in the long tradition of just war theory, by focusing on jus ante bellum (justice before war), and showing why it is entirely distinct from the question of jus ad bellum (justice of a war). As he argues, simply because some action may occasionally be justified (war, rebellion, and perhaps even torture) does not mean it requires a permanent institution.

Dobos divides the social, moral, and cultural risks of the military into five categories.

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First, there is the issue of what Dobos calls "moral damage," which comes from military conditioning. We know that soldiers can be killed and physically wounded in war, and this is a significant cost, but even without fighting all soldiers can be morally damaged.

While there has been much recent discussion of "moral injury" among returned war fighters, Dobos argues that the kind of moral injury being referred to, namely moral trauma, is only one kind of moral injury. There is another kind, namely moral degradation, which is the moral desensitization that happens to soldiers because of military conditioning. Quite simply, military training conditions people to be able to kill other people without suffering emotional distress, and to be able to do so repeatedly. While for most of us, killing someone else, even if it were necessary for self-defense, would ordinarily lead to significant emotional distress, for the soldier this is a handicap that military training deliberately seeks to remove. Dobos argues that those individuals who no longer have sensitivity to killing are morally damaged. The removal of such sensitivity—which people of good character should have (we should feel bad about killing)—is the *intention* of military conditioning, and so makes soldiers worse people in one respect.

While this first risk is to the military personnel themselves, the second risk that Dobos identifies is a risk to the whole of society. The very institution that is supposed to protect the members of the society to which it belongs is, in fact, the biggest threat to self-determination and human rights worldwide. In the latter half of the twentieth century, there were 471 attempted military coups globally, 232 of them successful. A majority of the world's countries experienced at least one coup event over this period; as much as 80 percent of countries in sub-Saharan Africa, 76 percent of countries in North Africa and the Middle East, and 67 percent of countries in Latin America. Worldwide this works out to an average of around nine coup attempts every year for fifty years.[4] So while we may think the military is necessary to defend us against foreign powers that may abuse our human rights and govern us in ways we do not want, the greatest risk of these harms occurring is internal: from a military coup. Because of the way that militaries are separated from wider society, there can develop a "civil-military gap." This makes it easier for militaries to step in and take over civilian governments, to see their fellow citizens as "other" and commit gross human rights abuses against them, and to have very different values. We should not expect a military coup to be any less nasty and destructive than a foreign invasion. And

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as Dobos shows, in many places the probability of a coup is higher than the risk of foreign invasion—not even democracies are "coup proof."

Even if one thinks his or her country can mitigate the very high coup risk, the military may still make us unsafe. The third risk, then, is that the military may unintentionally provoke the very thing it is supposed to deter: a foreign attack. Here, Dobos argues that a bigger military may lead to preventive attacks. Other countries may decide, and indeed historically have often decided, to strike first when they perceive a general increasing military threat (this should be distinguished from a "preemptive" attack, which is intended to defeat an imminent offensive or invasion). Indeed, Dobos points out that this preventive approach is a greater risk post–9/11 than it was before, when there was a respected norm against preventive wars. The United States, as a norm leader, justified its incursion in Iraq as preventive and other countries now use the same language to justify their actions. Likewise, the use of drone strikes by the United States and other countries can only be seen as preventive. The coup risk and the preventive attack risk make militaries partly self-defeating: to increase our security, we invest enormously in these security institutions, but those institutions make our overall level of security go down rather than up.

Fourth, Dobos argues that humans are subject to cognitive biases that lead both to the overuse of military forces and to the underestimation of the damage and death toll likely to result from such use. And this is true even in a best-case scenario in which those in charge of our militaries are decent people, not hawkish warmongers. Drawing on both psychological research and real-world examples, Dobos argues the following points: that we are likely to greatly overestimate the chances of military success and think all our wars are winnable; that we see problems as having military solutions just because we have a military (if you have a hammer, every problem is a nail); that we falsely think we uniquely have the skill and control to avoid civilian casualties; and, wrongly, that we think civilians are culpable. Given these biases, ordinary, decent people are likely to support engaging in unjust wars, especially when their country has the means of war at its ready disposal.

Fifth and finally, Dobos argues that a military mindset can pollute civilian life. Military values go beyond the advertised values of loyalty, duty, restraint, and dedication—all of which Dobos has no problem with. These go hand in hand with the equally important suppressed (not advertised) values of toughness, stoicism, forcefulness, and hierarchical authority that infuse society and tend to

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make society worse. This is because we start to see civilian problems as having military solutions, and this can directly undermine the purpose of these institutions. In law enforcement, for example, rather than police serving the public, the public comes to be seen as the enemy—something not helped by the transfer of both personnel and high-powered weaponry from the military to local police forces. This may explain the high number of police shootings and violence, particularly in the United States.[5] Because militaries need to constantly recruit and have the right sorts of recruits, we see military values and practices infuse civilian life: in everything from school uniforms, timetables, and curriculum choices—all of which may seem relatively unproblematic—to gender constructs that push boys to "toughen up" and make war the ultimate test of manhood. These latter practices feed cultures of misogyny that result in gendered violence and discrimination. (It is worth noting that the most pacifistic societies have the most equal gender relations).[6]

If Dobos's argument is correct, then in some cases we may be better off without a standing military. We might be safer and have a better functioning society with fewer damaged individuals. And other countries' civilians would be safer, too.

Nevertheless, a worry likely remains for most of us: How will we defend ourselves once the military is gone? In the epilogue of his book, Dobos proposes a postmilitary civilian defense system, or CDS. Drawing on the extensive work of Gene Sharp, he explains how a nonviolent alternative exists that could successfully frustrate any aggressor's plans. Such a CDS would not only avoid the problems Dobos identifies with militaries but also offer successful self-defense and cultivate important civic virtues. Put simply, a CDS would involve a combination of widespread protest, noncooperation, and nonviolent intervention, all designed to thwart an invader's ability to govern and exploit an acquired territory and its population. All of this could make a population "politically indigestible" for a foreign aggressor. Dobos cites empirical data that shows that such nonviolent resistance is at least twice as likely to be successful as its violent counterpart. So, perhaps one of the reasons we still cling to the "necessity" of the military is that we have not fully considered less costly alternatives.

Symposium Overview

The essays in this symposium examine this new area of inquiry opened up by Dobos's book and take the question of jus ante bellum in important new directions.

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Neta Crawford, Cheyney Ryan, Tony Coady, Cécile Fabre, and Ned Dobos each examine the costs of a standing military—whether they are too high and whether states are under an obligation to bear these costs. Crawford begins by looking at the costs to democracy. After outlining four major understandings of the relationship between war and democracy, she suggests two seemingly opposing views. First, democracy can actually constrain the resort to war. Our democratic norms and institutions can and do keep the pull of war and violence in check. As she puts it, the more democratic a society is, the greater the limits it puts on the use of force both at home and abroad. But second, the militarization of a democratic state—as occurs with standing militaries and in times of war—can undermine these democratic norms and procedures. For example, in militarized societies information and debate are constricted by the state, power can be centralized, and patriotism can mean an unquestioning attitude toward the executive and the military. Ultimately, then, Crawford argues the cost to democracy of a standing military and of war is very real.

Ryan, in his contribution, brings significant local context and history to the examination of the costs of war preparation for political communities. He suggests that while Dobos asks the right questions about cost, we need to undertake a much less abstract examination of the costs by focusing on specific contexts. Taking a historical look at both Europe and the United States, he argues that it is hard to see a simple before and after of war. "War" for these countries was formal, time bound, and only conducted against other nation-states. But "hostilities"—essential for gaining and maintaining empire—were ongoing and undertaken without the recourse to the laws of war.

Moreover, we have moved from nationalized war, in which the ideal is the citizen soldier (exemplified in the period from the Battle of Valmy in 1792 to the Tet Offensive in 1968), to postnationalized war, in which we have tried to externalize both the fighting of and the preparation for war. This means that war preparation differs in time and context. Building for "war proper" was an internal affair in the age of the Great Powers, but building for empire was externalized, with human and material resources organized elsewhere. Thus nineteenth-century Britain prided itself on its lack of militarization despite being the dominant global power. Cheyney, building on what he calls "the Chickenhawk syndrome"—where contemporary citizens do not want to serve and fight, but still support war—applies these observations to the United States, which has been increasingly

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externalizing war building and fighting. Ryan's observations add considerable depth and complexity to what can be considered "before war."

Coady looks at war crimes as one of the costs of war and argues that their prevalence is underestimated in Dobos's calculation of the costs of maintaining a military. Dobos suggests that only accidental civilian casualties are an ineliminable feature of modern war and that war crimes can be managed away, with great effort. Coady disagrees and introduces us to "the asymmetry myth." This is the misguided idea that "our" military is morally superior to that of our adversaries and so would not commit war crimes like "they" do. Using a range of evidence, including the recent case of Australian Special Air Service Regiment, or SAS, soldiers in Afghanistan, Coady shows that this myth is not substantiated by facts. Both the "good" and the "bad" guys are responsible for war crimes, and this myth—sustained by romantic nationalism—only blinds us to this reality. Taking this into consideration, he argues that Dobos underestimates the costs of maintaining a military. Further, he argues that there are not likely to be feasible measures to mitigate against collateral damage and war crimes in the conflicts our military is involved in. These unavoidable costs to others are yet another reason to reconsider the existence of a standing military.

While Crawford, Ryan, and Coady seek to extend and add important details to Dobos's account of the cost of war preparation, Fabre pushes back against Dobos's argument as a whole. She argues that if we are under a duty to protect vulnerable third parties—such as in wars of humanitarian intervention and collective self-defense—then we are under a prospective duty to prepare for wars that defend others. She argues that this flips the burden of proof back onto military abolitionists. She does, however, acknowledge that this duty could be defeated if the costs of war preparation are excessive. But here she argues that Dobos's account of these costs is not accurate, and that the problems of moral injury, military coups, foreign military aggression, and unjust wars are either overstated or can be mitigated by other measures. Thus, she argues, in many contexts there remains a case for a standing military, even if our existing standing militaries may need to be reduced and policies undertaken to mitigate their costs.

Dobos argues directly against Fabre. Fabre uses the analogy of being under a prospective duty to learn to swim if there is a high chance of encountering a drowning child in the future. So, states are under a prospective duty to militarize if they are likely to have to protect their citizens or other citizens from grave threats of violence. Dobos accepts the analogy, but shows that when properly

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followed through it only supports a duty to militarize under highly unusual circumstances, not under the circumstances that most states today find themselves in. He argues that the use of military force is not more likely to succeed in these situations than nonmilitary solutions; that foreign aggression of the sort Fabre is concerned with is decreasing, and so does not have a "high chance" of occurring; and that the use of military force has a high chance of backfiring and actually making things worse for those it is trying to protect. Dobos argues that given these facts, a better analogy for Fabre's defense of a standing military —drawing on an infamous social media post—would be needing to keep high-powered semiautomatic weapons in case "30–50 feral hogs run into [your] yard within 3–5 mins while [your] small kids play," as one U.S. pro-gun advocate put it.[7] This highly unlikely scenario would involve obvious and continual dangers to all those involved, but the presence of these weapons would pose risks that seem highly disproportionate to any potential and rare benefit—just as Dobos argues is the case with a standing military.

To understand whether having a standing military is justified, in whichever context, we need to look not only at the potential costs and benefits but also at potential alternatives to military force. As noted, Dobos suggests that Gene Sharp's civilian defense system is one viable alternative. It is here that Christopher Finlay focuses his contribution. He begins by suggesting that if CDSs are as effective as their advocates argue, then they would seem a good defense against both foreign aggression *and* domestic military coups. So, the existence of a CDS may actually help negate one of the key costs of a standing military rather than offer an alternative. Finlay then distinguishes two types of nonviolent resistance. One type that Sharp and Dobos discuss is that in which CDSs frustrate a foreign aggressor's will through noncooperation and disruption until the aggressor gives up, as the cost of continuing is too high. The second involves persuasion and changing the aggressor's mind. Here, the aggressor would stop because it becomes convinced it is on the wrong path, not because the costs are too high. Finlay argues that the first type of nonviolent resistance is still coercive and can be used for both democratic-egalitarian and more fascistic ends, while the second is not. He points to the nonviolent activities of Trump supporters in the 2020 U.S. presidential election (such as organized protests, election "observers," and "Stop the count" chants directed against election officials) as attempts to use this first type of nonviolent resistance. He suggests it was the nonviolent and non*coercive* actions of those who were deeply invested in the principles and practices

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constitutive of the U.S. political system that warded off a Trump coup. As Finlay suggests, nonviolent alternatives to military force also need to be constrained by an ethics akin to just war theory.

David Rodin concludes the symposium by highlighting the novelty and ethical utility of examining jus ante bellum, but with one key proviso. Rodin argues that what should be considered is not justice *before* war but rather justice *between* wars, or *jus inter bellum*. He suggests that whether or not one thinks military abolitionism is justified (which is a matter of how the costs are weighed), military preparation outside of war still raises key ethical questions. These questions are not only important in themselves (for example, procurement, training, force posture, and personnel) but also directly affect the justice of an actual war. As he puts it, studying only jus ad bellum and jus in bello is akin to understanding an athlete's performance by only looking at how she performs during the Olympics, rather than the years of preparation leading up to it. If, for example, there are viable alternatives to military force that we neglect to explore or build between wars, such as a CDS, then while in an actual war we may appear to be justified in using military force, we may still be morally culpable because of an ethical failure jus inter bellum. Rodin's analysis takes justice before (or between) wars away from the simple but important question of military abolitionism and toward the ethical questions of the shape and design of our defense institutions themselves. He then shows how these neglected questions connect with the traditional areas of jus ad bellum and jus in bello. Thus, Rodin shows a rich and important seam for future investigation.

The question of jus ante bellum not only has been neglected in just war scholarship but also, as the papers in this symposium demonstrate, presents an important line of ethical inquiry. This is true not only for the question of military abolitionism, with a focus on the costs and alternatives, but also for questions of the shape and behavior of our existing military institutions. While these questions are distinct and important in themselves, they also have an impact on the traditional questions of jus ad bellum and jus in bello.

NOTES

[1] Cheyney Ryan, "Pacifism," in Seth Lazar and Helen Frowe, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Ethics of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 277–93, at p. 278.

[2] Quoted in Alex C. Michalos, "Militarism and the Quality of Life," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 577, no. 1 (December 1989), pp. 216–30, at p. 216.

[3] Ned Dobos, *Ethics, Security, and the War-Machine: The True Costs of the Military* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[4] Naunihal Singh, *Seizing Power: The Strategic Logic of Military Coups* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), pp. 2–3.

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[5] Jennifer M. Reingle Gonzalez, Stephen A. Bishopp, Katelyn K. Jetelina, Ellen Paddock, Kelley Pettee Gabriel, and M. Brad Cannell, "Does Military Veteran Status and Deployment History Impact Officer Involved Shootings? A Case-Control Study," *Journal of Public Health* 41, no. 3 (September 2019), pp. e245–52.

[6] C. K. Ogden and Mary Sargant Florence, "Militarism versus Feminism," in Margaret Kamester and Jo Vellacott, eds., *Militarism versus Feminism: Writings on Women and War* (1915; London: Virago, 1987).

[7] Max Benwell and Kari Paul, "What about the 30–50 feral hogs? Man's defense of assault weapons goes viral," *The Guardian,* August 6, 2019.

Abstract: Just war theory has traditionally focused on *jus ad bellum* (the justice *of* war) and *jus in bello* (justice *in* war). What has been neglected is the question of *jus ante bellum*, or justice *before* war. In particular: Under what circumstances is it justifiable for a polity to *prepare* for war by militarizing? When (if ever) and why (if at all) is it morally permissible or even obligatory to create and maintain the potential to wage war? What are the alternatives to the military? And if we do have militaries, how should they be arranged, trained, and equipped? These considerations are not about whether war *making* is justified, but about whether war *building* is justified. In *Ethics, Security, and the War-Machine*, Ned Dobos argues that we have not sufficiently calculated the true (noneconomic) costs of the military, and that if we did, having a standing defense force would not seem like as good an idea. Dobos pushes us to reflect on something we have taken for granted: that one of the biggest institutions in our society, which is supposed to keep us safe and allow us to lead our own lives, may in fact pose great dangers and risks to us physically, morally, and culturally. The essays in this symposium take Dobos's work as a starting point and show the importance, complexity, and richness of this new strand of ethical inquiry.

Keywords: jus ante bellum, justice before war, military disestablishment, cost of the military, standing military, Ned Dobos, civilian defense system

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