Ethical Necessities

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Abstract
In this paper I introduce my work in ethics, inviting others to draw on my approach to address the ethical issues that concern them. I set up the Centre for Ethical Philosophy at Durham University in 2007 to plug a puzzling gap in philosophical work to help us help the world. In 1. I set out ethical philosophy. In 2. I consider some implications, for example, that to do good we must pay much more attention to the beings around us, less to ourselves. In 3. I consider the implications for how we should think about war and peace. In 4. I draw out some implications for good political practice. In 5. I consider objections and conclude.

1. Ethical Philosophy

I set up my 'research centre', the Centre for Ethical Philosophy, at Durham University, at a time when universities in England were being encouraged to bring arts and social science activities more into line with norms in the sciences. A 'research centre' is a group of academics in different universities who can bid for money for projects from government bodies, university bodies, trusts, companies or wealthy individuals. My research centre was designed by Durham University as a forum for philosophical research projects which look at ethical issues in a new way – by concentrating on the perspective of those who suffer, the victims or patients.

Human life is made up of at least three different positions, which up to now have not been being very thoughtfully distinguished. First there is the position of the agent, the person working out what to do, or doing something, or dealing with the effects of their action. Second, there is the position of the patient, the person or creature or thing being responded to or acted on. Third, there is the position of the bystander, the person looking at or thinking about what an agent might do or has done, or what a patient might have done to or for them, to help or harm them.

Until quite recently, all our political and ethical thinking tended unconsciously to speak from the position of the bystander, or from the position of the agent. But while legal, political and

doi:10.1017/S0031819111000404 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2011

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819111000404 Published online by Cambridge University Press

academic systems would take account of both agent and community perspectives on ethical matters, they would typically and quite unconsciously leave out the perspective of the patient, the being done-to rather than doing, passive rather than active. Political and academic discussion of issues would unreflectively take itself to be bound up with the resolution of issues such as, how should we treat the perpetrator of a crime? or, was that action justifiable? Such discussions would typically consider the views of bystanders – the views of the judge and jury, of witnesses, journalists and other members of the community – as well as taking account of the views and extenuating circumstances of the agent. But what these systems used typically to fail to do, I noticed, was to look at issues from the point of view of the victim. In most advanced countries, the victim was more or less explicitly, and more or less completely, left out of legal processes.

As civilisation evolves, as our conceptual systems have grown more finely tuned, more sensitive, more accurate and detailed, the omission of the patient has, perhaps naturally, started to be noticed as an ethical and political issue. For example, an approach in legal work is being developed called 'restorative justice'. Rather than focusing only on the perpetrator, from the point of view of bystanders, what restorative justice does is to look at crime in holistic social ways, paying full and respectful attention to the perspective of victims, taking account of what they have to say, and how they would like matters to be resolved. As well as restorative justice initiatives, victim support practices and institutions are also increasingly available. In England, for example, growing sums of public money are being freely given to enable all sorts of innovative forms of therapeutic intervention for victims of torture.[1] So recognition is growing that there is a patient, done-to perspective which needs to be heard and helped. But there is still quite a way to go. In post-apartheid South Africa, the unsatisfactoriness of the lack of attention to victims was noticed, and a forum given to the done-to's to speak for themselves, giving their distinctive and ethically fundamental perspective a voice at last, in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Partly inspired by the growing call for attention of victims, partly inspired by the TRC, and perhaps mainly inspired by the puzzling silence so far from moral and political philosophers on the done-to

[1] To give an idea of the range and creativity of these attentions, see for example Gillian Allnutt's *The Galloping Stone* (Newcastle: New Writing North, 2010). Allnutt is a poet who in this volume works with victims of torture in profoundly respectful, yet also thoughtful and creative, ways.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819111000404 Published online by Cambridge University Press

perspective, CEP was specifically designed to give a forum to the done-to's. To set out in philosophical terms what we see when we are patients rather than agents or bystanders, done-to's rather than doers. To explore what the issues are, and how they look, from the patients' point of view.

The simple idea at the heart of the ethical philosophy at CEP, then, is that a significant proportion of human life consists not of doing, but of enduring – and that the done-to have as much to say, as many questions to raise, as any doers or bystanders (however sophisticated and endlessly talkative those may be). Taking up the done-to standpoint reveals quite quickly and clearly that the important ethical issues for the powerless done-to, can be very different from the issues that loom large for bystanders and doers.

The ethical philosophical approach given a forum by CEP, then, is to pay more attention to the quiet, mute, inarticulate, passive, powerless marginal side. To listen, to think about what is said, what questions raised and what solutions might be. I noticed a gap in attention to the done-to perspective in philosophy. But I had also been troubled by this gap in other parts of life. Like most people over 40, by the time I set up CEP I had been through some difficult things. I was sexually abused as a child. I was ostracised, dysfunctional and underachieving at school. I struggled with energy and mood swings at work. I had to manage depression and isolation when I had children and tried to complete a PhD in the same few years. I thought divorce would restore me – but it made things much, much harder as for years I struggled with fraught childcare arrangements and the difficulty of a new relationship. Of course, my life wasn't at all all bad. But, as philosophy searches for meaty conceptual challenges, so I was drawn to focus on the dark parts of the web my life wove around me.

Thought, that personal experience of dark, difficult marginal elements of life, actually taught me something very surprising: thinking doesn't help very much. Conceptualising, analysing, describing, making links, arguing… there is almost nothing one can't do with thought in relation to the dark puzzles and troubles of life. Initial thinking can be a powerful source of relief, lifting the mute shame and loneliness of horror from one's shoulders. But going on thinking about dark things, beyond the healing step of naming and sharing, doesn't help. It's not what you think. What restores trust and hope and happiness, then, is not so much thought as the end of thought. When you stop thinking and just be with your self and in the world, you get relief from all the dark parts of life and the world. The implication for my philosophical work and CEP's projects, then, is perhaps surprising. It is that, once we have named and

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shared any dark stuff, we need not to fight those things, not to give them any more attention that in our suffering we already have. We need to unravel the dark knots, simplify, and move away from thought to being. The task of philosophy is to unravel and disperse. Not to name and elaborate, then fight and win.

I learned a lot from personal experience about what philosophy has missed out in its thoughtless failure to consider the perspective of the done-to. The experience of trying to combine academic and domestic work was particularly – and very painfully – instructive, and it shaped my evolving view of what philosophy is missing, and how the omission can be put right. As a feminist moral philosopher, I was steeped in the done-to perspective. Philosophically, I came to feel early on that this perspective is just as basic, just as pervasive and important as agency. So I wanted to give it more attention – give it its head, pay it its philosophical due, as it were. Even in my student days, I had felt, if not yet conceptualised, my done-to, housework-entangled, vulnerable, needy but mute view. I did feel, though – strongly, if blindly – that the done-to perspective was being marginalised and unduly neglected by the philosophical 'main stream'. And I was hungry to get it clear.

For example, I deeply wanted to correct the hurt that philosophy and politics and popular culture have inflicted on women as they think and feel. I wanted to use philosophy, conceptual analysis, to ameliorate the cruel harms of patriarchy. To recognise, express and explore the neglected, marginalised, oppressed concepts women use to think about, talk over and act in the world. To pick those concepts up out of the dust where patriarchy keeps dumping them. To dust them off, and to show how they show the light. Women's long-used concepts, like those of the dominant patriarchal talk we learn, are designed to refer to the entities and relations and duties and ends that matter to fellow-speakers. Women don't 'nag' or 'gossip' or 'meander' with words. They talk. What has driven them crazy, perhaps made them go on a bit, is that so few men have *listened*. Have paid attention, kept still, not appropriated or distorted what women are saying, but *listened*, and joined women to help make sense of the issues that concern us.

2. How Needs are fundamental

Even before I set up the CEP in 2007, then, I was well on the way towards thinking about ethical issues in a woman-centred way, starting from what we suffer and how we think and deal with all that. In

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my paper on abortion, 'Motherhood and Maternal Moral Authority' in *Hypatia*, for example, I listen for the concepts women use when they talk about pregnancy, mothering and abortion decisions. In the course of investigating a well-known ethical problem that way, I bring to light some important points that mainstream philosophy, with its unthinking patriarchal starting points, has left out, or misunderstood, or rode over in rough patriarchal ways – things like the utter privacy to the woman of pregnancy, and the source of the anathema qualities of a foetus resulting from rape. These issues, ignored in standard patriarchal philosophical work in ethics, are important – they cast a new light on the ethics of pregnancy.[2]

Many years on, I can see the ethical approach in philosophy I am developing in CEP was inspired in part by the 'feminist standpoint epistemology' first articulated by Sandra Harding.[3] Harding, dealing with science rather than philosophy, argued that marginalised women on the sidelines (or worse – underneath) are well placed to see important issues that central, powerful men keep missing. They can see resulting harms. They can see costs. And they have optimal motivation to think up better alternatives and remedies. What I found, when I approached ethics from the woman-centred perspective that is the feminist standpoint, was a basic structure which was missed by male-dominated philosophy. Starting with male paradigms of success and power, available accounts of ethics were failing to notice how agents are restricted, un-free in relation to the needs of those around them.

I paid attention to women's lives – especially my own. With an intuitive but unanalysed and very challenging conviction that it was my right, I became a mother while I was doing my PhD in 1988. It was while I was caring for my baby Chloe that it came to me for the first time, so clearly and simply, that the philosophical paradigm of moral demand is the need of a baby. Mothers are simply, absolutely obliged to meet their babies' needs. Patriarchal theories of ethics, because they have typically been thought up 'on holiday' from the work of caring for home and children, have missed this. Instead, they have hunted all over the place, roaming all the world and its concepts in search of the nature and source of normativity, when if they had thought properly and noticed what constituted the source of

[2] See Soran Reader, 'Abortion, Killing and Maternal Moral Authority', *Hypatia* **23** (1), 2008, 132–150.

[3] See Sandra Harding *Whose science? Whose knowledge?* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991) and *The feminist standpoint theory reader: Intellectual and political controversies* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819111000404 Published online by Cambridge University Press

human life, they would surely have noticed the elementary source of ethical normativity: a baby's needs.

Infant needs are not just basic as a source of normativity. They are also inalienable. Even the most absurdly radical example from sophistical analytic philosophy cannot show a moral agent who has never learned the rudiments of what needs are and how to meet them: we are here, so we know our needs were met. The more powerful we are now, *pace* perverse patriarchal philosophers who overvalue solitary independence, the better our needs were met. Every capability we now have, owes its very being to the work of others to give us what we needed to become capable.

Needs are fundamental, and philosophy needs to see this. The very concept on its own says this. Our most basic, inalienable needs are the necessary conditions for our being. I need life, rather in the way that a cooking pot needs a base, or a triangle needs three sides. Unless those elementary needs are met, the being is damaged, incomplete. A bottomless pot, a broken triangle, a lifeless human being. The most fundamental needs are closest to the essence, the elements, the heart of the being in question. All beings in the contingent world we've been dealt are vulnerable. All can become needy. All depend on other things in order to be – in our case, to be born, to grow, to learn, to act and connect with each other and with the things of the world.

Moral philosophy is basically philosophy used to describe and explain ethics. Ethics is the practice of doing what is right and good. We developed the concept of need in tandem with our ethical awareness and skill, to provide the tool we need to distinguish within our communities the demanding from the undemanding, the serious from the less serious, the necessary from the unnecessary. When we have to act, and when we can relax – seek our own ends, or enjoy ourselves.

The concept of need is what we concept-users use to draw this crucial line. A line between a normative, morally demanding situation, and a morally neutral one. Different species, communities, agencies may draw the line in different places. But all converge in agreement of the basic idea of what ethics is: ethics is the practice of distinguishing between needs and other abilities to benefit, and taking the obligation to meet needs to trump obligations to seek any other ends (for example, wealth, pleasure, happiness). No community could function which took every agent to be obliged to help every other agent to do or be whatever they wanted.

We have been misled into thinking there are no basic simple ethical truths – even that moral scepticism or relativism may be right – by

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patriarchal ethical thinking, which has focused on agents, their ends and their competitors, rather than on patients and their needs. We lost sight of the basic, simple, unarguable normativity of essential needs which is shown most cleary in the obligations a baby's needs place on its mother.

The concept of need, then, is the missing piece philosophers need to solve the problems their patriarchal perversity has engineered for ethics. Need explains normativity. It explains how we draw a line between moral demands and free choices. If you need water I am morally obliged to help you get it. If you need another 10p to make a prank phonecall, I am not morally obliged to help. I might want to help. You might want me to. Your friends might think less of me if I don't. But the moral element is what is important here. It says: if you don't *need* x in order to carry on being the thing you are, moral agents are not morally obliged to help you. They might be socially, or scientifically, or playfully, or romantically obliged. But the obligations are not ethical, because they are not rooted in what matters most fundamentally. They are not rooted in needs – inalienable requirements for things without which very being is at risk.

Attention to the patients' point of view, then, not only shows that needs matter. It also helps us explain moral normativity. That is, it holds the key to unlock the philosophical confusion caused by the patriarchal myopia of milennia. Moral agents use the concept of need to distinguish between what demands help and what does not. Different communities draw the line in different places. Different circumstances make a difference to how and where the line can be drawn. But the basic ethical project, neatly encapsulated in the founding ethical act of caring for a baby, remains the same. It is to look after the vulnerable beings in the world, enabling them to be by making sure that as far as possible their needs are met.

This needs-centred theory of ethics complements, rather than competes with, other basic theory-styles. Virtue-theory describes ethical practice from the point of view of the agent. Deontological theory describes the structure of reasoning when agents have to decide what to do. And consequentialist theories describe the results. By analysing ethics as a practice, I show how the theory-types are not rivals, as they are usually thought to be. Rather, they are accounts of ethics based on different perspectives, each of which highlights a different aspect of the whole practice of ethics. The theories we have had so far in patriarchal philosophy have neglected the patient as a basic element, so in my work I try to put that right. The dividend I found is that a patient-centred approach also reveals the source and nature of moral normativity.

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Although my approach in ethics grew quite independently out of the hard challenges of life and the philosophical efforts I made to overcome them, I do now see some links with other theorists, which I mention to invite you to pursue them if you are interested. I was intrigued by an often quoted approach to belief:

> The Son of God was crucified: I am not ashamed – because it is shameful. The Son of God died: it is immediately credible – because it is silly. He was buried, and rose again: it is certain – because it is impossible.
>
> Tertullian's *De Carne Christi* Chs 5, 4

It seemed to me that Tertullian took it as an aspect or element of piety, not that you forfeit rationality, but that you put your rationality to work to help you believe the hardest things. To me it seemed Tertullian proposed that we should take this obligation as a form of humility: because it makes me feel irrational, stupid, ridiculous, exposed – precisely because of all that, I am obliged to work there intellectually, to believe what is true if incomprehensible. Because I cannot understand, I am obliged to take the perilous, exposing leap of commiting myself to truths I cannot understand and fervently wish I had nothing to do with.

Reading Simone Weil over the years perhaps also nudged me in the direction of a done-to centred approach to ethics.[4] Weil emphasises the moral demandingness of the most vulnerable, least powerful. She shows how the most vulnerable, weakest, most needy, might hold the key to the truths and insights that we are likely to miss, but which are most important to us, so need to be given priority. Certainly, they need to be heard. She uses the example of a courtroom to show the poignant inequality between powerful authority and weak witness, and the dangers of its effects. Her apparently paradoxical idea, that it is from the least powerful that we have most to learn, chimes with the thinking that led me in to ethical philosophy.

Another important influence has been Judith Herman. In her book *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman shows us how attention to what we have suffered may be the only route to insight, the only way to end the torment and provide the relief we need to carry on a meaningful human life.[5]

[4] See for example *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Towards Mankind* (London: Routledge, 1952)

[5] See Judith Herman, *Trauma and recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997)

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Hannah Arendt has been perhaps the most personally fulfilling and philosophically important source of inspiration. I first read her book *The Human Condition*, where in an unacknowledged but clearly feminist view she shows how natality constitutes the almost magical human power to make new and hopeful futures. A fresh start requires attention to what is, what needs what and how the needs might be met. Arendt argues that the gift of human agency that is natality enables us to progress ethically and politically through life in ever better ways. We weave a secure future for ourselves and for each other by making promises. We undo the dark stains created by evil acts and practices, by forgiving. To Arendt's world-wide-natal-web of promising and forgiving, with my own work I have added the idea that one cardinal human promise is to make sure needs are met. And the knots created by wrongdoing in the world by forgiving.

Arendt's work is a philosophical fountain. She writes on thinking, willing and judging, on violence, on revolution, on the historic and geographic truths about Judaism and Nazism – and much, much more. In her work, I find profound original ideas on the evils and injustices we face, and plenty of hope-restoring ideas on what we need to think about if we are to be able to prevent or restore, to forgive, even to work with the perpetrators to get to better political times. To this, in my work I have added my own view, neatly echoed in South African political history, that we need to forgive the people who have maimed so many lives with perverse, constricted, destructive ideas. We women have to work with, not against, men. To do that we have first to forgive them, to trust that we are in this together. We academics have to work with, not against, the people who dictate the latest perversions of our beloved profession.

3. How Peace is fundamental

I have been a pacifist since I was a child. Growing up in militarist apartheid South Africa, it was unspeakably obvious to me that war is wrong. I have stood by my pacifist principles as a philosopher, but my fellow philosophers have made it difficult and distressing. Violence is so obviously wrong, that one is startled by any question of its justification. Conceptually speaking, the disorientation is momentary. But in real time, witnessing and thinking about and discussing war-ism, I was thrown off track for a couple of decades. My most recent shift has been one of attention. I have realised that I – along with almost everyone else – have been duped into paying attention

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to irrational bad action (the indiscriminate violence of war), when I should be paying attention to the better action which war destroys: peace. Peace has within it all the keys we need to enable us to prevent war, and to heal the devastation war leaves in its wake. We should pay attention to the alternative to evil. We should describe the contours, the elements, the conceptual structure of peace. That is the way from war to peace. We should not divert ourselves with a philosophical plunge into the icy horror waters of war. To get to peace, we need to work from it.

Ethical philosophy helps to get clear both what is wrong with the talk and practice of war, and what we need to do to put things right. When we turn the lens in a CEP way, and look at war from the point of view of the done to – the bombed, shot at, threatened – rather than the point of view of the doer, the soldier, his commanders, ruling politicians and the citizen bystanders at home, we see very quickly and simply what is wrong with war. We see it faster, simply and plainly, than we ever could more from the point of view of the violent soldier, or the powerful policymaking bystander.

The lessons about war from an ethical philosophical perspective are powerful and obvious, then. They are also urgent. It really is incredible that the done-to perspective has not been noticed and listened to. It really is incredible, that the marginalisation of the majority who are harmed victims has been kept up. That we are still snarled up in ridiculous pervasive faux justifications for things that, from the done-to perspective, are absolutely and unambiguously not just questionable, but plain evil.

The done-to perspective brings the dark underbelly of war up into the light. Sanitised, impersonal military political discussion quantifies over 'lives', 'buildings', 'deaths' and 'injuries'. It also mystifies barbaric weapons, encouraging us towards the fallacy that because talking about this piece of equipment is easy and seems rational, the practice must be too. These perversions happen not just in political discussion, but also on the media and in teaching and learning. The myth that war is a game is reified all over the world in computer games, TV, cinema. Even news coverage is 'sanitised', in a way that is profoundly unhelpful to citizens. If you don't see the barbarous absurdities of the indiscriminate killings of war, you are not seeing war. If you don't see war, you are much less likely to be able to talk rationally about it.

How the CEP perspective helps here, is that it shows us a simple way to make the issues clear. And we have not changed the topic, so we cannot be accused (as pacifists so often, so unfairly, are) of being naive, distracting from the tough realities of war. What is

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instantly clear, when we shift our focus from soldiers to the people they are attacking, is that what the victims need is peace. They need the guns and bombs and threats to stop, so that they can live and feel safe. If they are frail or vulnerable, they need all that violent cacophony to stop so that their community can care for them. They need peace, so that they can do what they have to do. Looking further ahead, they will acknowledge they need peace so that they can develop ways to meet the needs of the maturing, ever deeper and more complex culture of a peaceful community. Everyone needs space, fora and resources for culture to unfold and evolve safely. Children need care, including education. Farmers need land, skills, protection of crops and livestock so that they can do what they are meant to do, unhindered. Parents need safe places for their children to play, and trustworthy fellow human beings to help them protect their children. Old people need safe, warm, quiet spaces to ease their lives as they grow more fragile, uncertain, closer to their end. They too need caring people around them. Those who know, need schools and universities – infrastructures which protect and evolve the practices, and enable them to pass on. Commercial activities need safe markets and people free, strong and secure enough to trade.

The needs of people seen as patients rather than agents are obvious, once you look at things from their point of view – even glance, as I have just done. To live human lives, we need there to be no war. There is another consequence which is equally obvious, but not recognised. The obvious consequence, is that war is impermissible. It is incapable of justification. It is in the same position as any other form of barbaric destruction. All of us, absolutely, always, need there to be no war. We need peace, to enable us to be what we are.

The consequences of this victim-centred revelation are profound, and have not yet been recognised. If war is unjustifiable, a rational person cannot be a soldier. A rational community cannot use an army, cannot use murderous or mass-destructive weapons. The 'cannot' here is a categorical, absolute, Kantian prohibition. It is inconceivable, there is no situation imaginable on earth or in heaven, in the past or in the future, that could possibly make war permissible. War, the use of indiscriminate violence by one group against another, is absolutely impermissible.

If this is so clear from the done-to point of view, how has it been missed? My understanding of how draws on my feminist approach. When you hear about a topic in a philosophical conversation, you are usually given some starting points. Some concepts, and some allegedly uncontentious, innocuous statements which show how those

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concepts 'necessarily' work. I put the 'necessarily' in scare quotes, because the necessity only follows from the definition that is being discussed. A philosopher's innocuous starting definition of a key concept can, of course, be wrong. Philosophers can be wrong. If a definition misses something out, if it fails to take account of some important element or aspect of use – the way the concept works in real life – then no truths will be derivable from any argument that relies on that definition. Let alone necessary truths. Though the claims may look and sound sound, the definitions look clear, when the definition is imperfect, the claims really are the worst kind of straw – grown on poisonous soil, polluting and darkening, obscuring truths we badly need.

How has this worked in our thinking about war? Well, in the political media, and even in philosophy, war-ist 'hawks' have taken huge advantage of the fact, the 'normality', of war. Collective violence is as old as our species. Threats and attacks happen, the analysis goes. All we can do is do the same bad thing back, hoping for better effects. 'We have no choice', we're stuck with war. It is a necessary evil. A margin-centred approach, in contrast, suggests that precisely because the scourge of war with its apparent rationales is so common, we need to hear how the victims see it. We need to think harder, dig deeper, question more and look more clearly through the concepts at work. The edges, the underside – those are the places where the irrationality of war can be clearly seen.

In my own work on war over several years, I worked towards doing this, rather too slowly. Before I cut to the chase, and tackled questions from the victims' point of view, I worked out what was wrong by looking very slowly and carefully at the concepts of war, the soldier, violence, weaponry, army wrong-doing, punishment and defence. When you look at the key concepts thoroughly, the insanity of war, the outrages and perversions perpetrated against human beings by those making war, do become clear. Crystal clear, shocking. War is totally impermissible, totally irrational, totally perverse, totally evil. It is a scourge. Our only duty as rational beings in relation to it, is to expose its lies and draw attention away from it enough to get it stopped.

It isn't easy. And it took me terribly long, because I fell for the first militarist diversion, the insistence that because an argument is on the table a topic must be given attention. I would not be expected to produce careful, detailed, faultlessly rigorous conceptual arguments to show that sticking a penis into a baby is wrong. But such is the lazy blindness, the sophistical habits of philosophers, that, to help us end the practice of war, for a long time I felt obliged to tilt at mountains of philosophical writing allegedly explaining and justifying war.

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Now, with an ethical philosophical approach, I have seen how to expose the mistakes in this war-ist philosophical work, in a much simpler way than by arguing against them. When you look at the issues from the done-to perspective, that simple gestalt shift makes it all instantly, simply quite clear. Indiscriminate violence destroys people, communities, infrastructures and history. It is useless. It is deeply harmful, deeply painful for everyone who is hit or threatened by it.

I have – all through my philosophical career – felt I had to do conceptual business with fellow thinkers who allow the most barbaric human practices possible, like bombing and machine-gunning, might be rational. The trouble with the perverse philosophical habit of using gruesome violent examples, is that it can make certain actual human practices – like bombing and machine-gunning, say – appear to have a place in the range of possible good policies for government, when actually they are no better candidates for rational policy than an apocalypse could be.

I now think our thinking about war will do better to ignore the misuse of concepts and arguments as faux rationales for barbarism, just as we more healthily ignore the faux rationales criminals like to offer for crime. Mania does not deserve the flattery of rational engagement. War is not an abstract question to be mused on through sketched examples in a lazy detached sophistical perversion of philosophy. War is the destruction of civilization. It frightens and harms people with barbaric indifference. This is being done, some of it in our name, as I write. The view I have reached now, is that as philosophers we owe it to humanity, to put our conceptual shoulders to the wheel, to do our work of conceptual analysis to expose and stop this maniac juggernaut of barbarity wickedly garbed in the emperor's clothes of 'necessary evil', before it is too late. The emperor of just war is not just a show. He is threatening the anihilation of human life and even the world, as we muse.

The ethical philosophical way of looking at things, starting with the patient, being attentive to what they need, then, helps us not just to see that peace is possible. It lights up a different world, a world shaped by the majority of ordinary, non-violent, needy people who care for each other. The different elements and aspects that the patient-centred perspective switches us to, are just as real, just as present, as immediate and obvious. They have been left out not because they are marginal or unimportant, but because the agents of the violences of war have shut them off. When we look at war from the done-to point of view, suddenly but startlingly easily, we can see how *of course* peace is a necessary condition for human

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life. How could we have missed this? Forgotten it, ignored it? Peace is fundamental, essential, basic.

The revelation of pacifism from this perspectival shift is also disorienting because it suddenly shows the militarist perversions which have been hiding from us. Far from being 'radical' or 'wishful' or 'naive' or 'perverse', peace is simple, banal, ordinary. It is still the point at the heart of human life. We get from the storm of war to the stillness of peace, from one world to another, from war-ism to pacifism, instantly in a simple, complete gestalt shift. We do not, after all, need to argue from the fact, the 'normality' of war, to a rationale for peace. That would take forever, and move us nowhere. When we start from a war-ist perspective, we are already caught in their web, snarled up in dark perversions of concepts and arguments, held fast. But if we simply start from a different perspective, from the solid ground and reality of the patients' point of view, no argument is needed. It is simply, instantly clear what is wrong with war. All we need to do, is open our minds and *think* outside the web of lies we are being told.

Peace is the simple, complete prohibition of violence. Of course, in extreme and closely watched contexts, we can be justified in using violence to stop a greater harm. But that is never indiscriminate violence. No bombs or machine-guns can justifiably be made. No-one can justifiably be trained to design, make or use any such thing. We cannot ever use innocents as means. We don't need, as war-ists have kept on alleging, to solve the all problems that are held up as rationales for war, to make complete peace possible. Rather, we need to shift our perspective, to stop looking myopically at perpetrators, and instead pay attention to the weak, vulnerable done-tos who are at the heart of war. We need to recognise and pay attention to their norm of peace, which is all around us, which makes our lives, our civilisation and our achievements possible. Peace is not unusual or radical. It is the only condition we can act or think or speak or be from. War is chaos, it is not a form of life. Peace is not radical or outlandish. It is right here, ordinary, all around us all the time. It is a necessary condition for any human life or achievement to be possible. Perhaps an example will ram the point home. I could not write this paper if I were being bombed or shot at. Peace, far from being a radical, fanciful alternative to war-ism, is a basic need of all humanity, a necessary condition for any achievement.

4. Implications for good political practice

As well as enabling us to see, in a disorientingly speedy instant, what is wrong with war, the patients'-need-centred approach also has some

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819111000404 Published online by Cambridge University Press

interesting clear implications for political practice. The first political point it makes, is that we need to stop thinking of ourselves as powerful beings making decisions about and for the needy, imposing policy on them, and carrying it out. We need to hand over the stick, and sit down and listen to those we hope to help (as Robert Chambers described the point which aid-practice has been missing: to work it needs to be bottom-up, not top-down).[6] To live well, we need to help those who need our help. To find out what they need, we need to learn from them. To meet their needs, we need, again, first to listen, then to assist. Where we do have some expertise, we need to share it – make it available, and help them to see its value.

In hard cases, the patient-centred perspective makes it very clear that we do need to share what we know. A myth prevails among aid practitioners and policymakers, that we can know life-changing politically significant things about a person or a group, but decline to share those things out of 'respect' for their community and its way of life. This is a confusion, a reversion to agent-power-centred thinking. We humans all need to know, and we all need to trust and be equal with those who come into our lives. Maybe more tact is needed – maybe we should give those about whom we have some dark knowledge (AIDS infection, say, or infertility) a chance to guide us, to say what they don't want to hear. But the imperative to recognise the full humanity of the people we are dealing with, does not go away. We have to pay attention not just to the policies or customs of those we meet. We also have to pay attention to what each individuals says, thinks and feels.

There is a second interesting political implication which the patient-centred perspective suggests. Handing over the stick – or shall we say, the microphone? – to those we seek to help, suggests just gently, that we throw away the rule book. We ignore policy, practice, rules. Instead of acting out pre-defined practice, we simply listen. Only once we have heard clearly what is needed, should we try to decide how we can help. Generalisation – policy, rules for action – comes *after* the practical matter of connecting with needy people, listening to them, and working out how to help.

This is a profound reversal. It also has truly revolutionary implications. Implications we would do well to pay attention to, and put the lessons into practice.

As particularists tell us, each actual situation is unique. Each present actual situation is prior to theory or description. The actual situation – what is around us, what is happening, is fundamental. It

[6] See for example Robert Chambers, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*, (Sussex: Institute of Development Studies, 1983).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819111000404 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is this unique reality, that we have to pay attention to – to deal with, to enjoy, to help others enjoy, to describe, to accept. What is real, what is here, what is happening – that is what matters. Not what might be. Not what would have been, if we had a different policy, or a different policy-making practice (as John Rawls, for example, suggests with his 'veil of ignorance' device for constructing good policy).[7]

Our real political place is not in some abstract Shangri-La or Utopia, some theoretically perfected civilisation. No. And our philosophical and political work urgently needs to recognise this. To stop putting theory first. We need to put word in its place. Which is *last*. Not first. Language – theory, policy, description – comes *after* life, after ethical action, after political practice. To think properly and helpfully, we have first to recognise who we are, where we are speaking from. We are speaking as our simple imperfect selves. We are speaking from a humble, attentive place – a mixture of insight and blindness, understanding and incomprehension, good ideas about what might help, and bad ideas. Stupid ones. Perverse ones.

We need to see our human condition. We need to recognise that we truly are *in medias res* (as David Wiggins has put it in conversation). Philosophical issues are not elaborate conceptual castles in the air, made by taking language on holiday (as Wittgenstein put it). They are issues about how our concepts are doing *right here and now*, and how they might do better. Until we philosophers recognise that, and put words and theories, other times and other places in their place, we will keep talking nonsense, wasting our lives fiddling about and being utterly unhelpful. Like Plato's Crito, we will carry on ceaselessy, uselessly, meaninglessly but perversely, wastefully and irritatingly, distractingly, banging on a tin pot. Our words will be like St Thomas Aquinas's words, like straw. Only worse. More dangerous than limiting our attention to the here and now and the people with us. What we have to do to live well is *to think*. To think about what is going on and how our concepts are dealing with it. Hannah Arendt noticed how absolutely fundamental thought is. We need to think about our life with war, in the way we feminist standpointers do, see it how it looks from the point of view of the done-to, not the doers. That will teach us.

5. Objections

The first objection that seems to occur to people when they hear this view, is that it is too simple. This is a mistaken objection, an example

[7] See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (New York: Belknap, 1971).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819111000404 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of a mistaken, perverted use of our capacity to think. Ethics is simple. We have fluffed up all sorts of nonsense around it because that is what a fractally complex, evolving system of thought (aka 'language') leads us to do, if we don't keep our bearings by constantly reminding ourselves that language is *as straw*. Language is not the realities it refers to and attempts to describe.

Our anti-simplistic mistake has been to elaborate and mystify ethical practice so much, that we have lost sight of the practice itself. We have not just lost our bearings by making this error, either. We have also disempowered the ethically informed people around us. Simple, often almost wordless folk around us who 'instinctively', that is, without saying or writing much, do good. Mystificatory high-falutin complicated elaborate talk of ethics effectively steals the expertise from those who really have it (really good people, who may not have much – or even anything – to say), and presents all the piles of language – bizarre narratives, conceptual analyses, perverse imagined examples – as though they are at the heart of ethics, as though they have the power to reveal its essence. When nothing could be further from the truth. No theory of anything could be a more complete reversal of the reality, which is that ethics is simple, fundamental, a basic part of humanity, and utterly inalienable. There could not be a human being born to a mother in this world, who did not learn ethics. Ethics is simple, but simplicity is not cheapness or poverty. Simplicity is a mark of the depth and obviousness and importance of a truth.

A second objection is often made to pacifism, that it may be helpful to go through here. I have discussed this in other papers under the hold-all heading 'Hitler's coming'. The point is that some agents are so dangerous and so powerful that we need to be armed and ready to fight them to end the horrific evils they have started and, un-fought, will continue. In this spirit, Hitler is presented as a *reductio ad absurdam* of pacifism. Being ready to make war is thought to be the lesser of the two evils, leaving Hitler to do his worst, or killing millions to stop him.

Whilst I see the rhetorical power of this argument, I do not believe we should accept it. The example certainly shows – graphically demonstrates – the dangers of certain political practices. Harmful and humiliating post-WWI policies against Germany, a power vaccuum and perverse evolving political practices in Germany, teach us a very clear simple lesson, which it seems we have still to learn. The lesson is: we are in this world together. Just as we need to deal with any dangerous politics development in our neighbourhood, so we need to deal with any dangerous politics developing anywhere else.

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The idea that we should be ready to bomb or shoot people who do bad things in foreign countries, is an ill-formed inadequate idea. We need to make sure Hitler does not get to power (as, for painful example, we need, right now, to make sure the British National Party does not come to govern England). 'How can we make sure?', the *faux* tragic, helpless war-ist will ask, 'It's impossible.' Well, no, it isn't impossible. It's just difficult, and requires constant action to prevent and to remedy the realities and the ideas of war. We have to teach our children that they can never be violent – or make weapons. We have to watch for wicked corruption, hone skills for doing that, for preventing it, or for isolating it, for cutting it off and snuffing it out before it grows, hurricane-like, too virulent and momentous to get any control over it until it blows out.

The point is, war cannot be justified, it cannot be rational. So, no matter how bad the political problem, war cannot help. It offers no solution. It may feel – from the bystander position – as if it is helping, but in fact it is making things worse. War terrorises people, or, perhaps worse, de-sensitises them to violence, makes the horror of war seem normal. It is true that many people who succumb to the Hitler argument are thoughtful, moral people. But the point is that they have not yet thought hard enough about what it is that they are saying yes to – which is unjustifiable indiscriminate violence. No-one would suggest that we have to condone kidnapping to stop kidnappers. Just so, we cannot stoop to condone war to stop other war-ists. There are other, better ways. Our job is to find them.

The third more general objection I have encountered, is that what I am proposing may be too touchy-feely and cult-like to be of any real use in political practice. Again, I think we can see through and past this objection. It is true, that it can be a utopian fantasy, to imagine the powerful 'getting down, handing over the stick and listening'. The ethical proposal is that to find the right thing to do, all we need to do is to listen and to think. Our listening need not be cultish. I don't need to kneel in breathless adoration before the person I want to help, any more than I need them to kneel in front of me. The principle of reversal of attention is simple and widely applicable. It reveals lots of needs, and lots practical ways of meeting them. That is what happens when you look and listen: you see and you learn. So although it might sound a bit wacky, in fact it is no more radical or new-agey than, say, using a pen rather than a feather to write things down.

What's more, it isn't new. I'm sure as we focus more thoroughly on practices of learning how to help by listening, we will find plenty of expertise, plenty of examples, plenty of skilful individuals and fun

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819111000404 Published online by Cambridge University Press

narratives that we can learn from, share and help to evolve. Listening is (necessarily, note!) as old as talking. We just need to recognise it as the keystone of ethics and political practice.

Finally, it might be objected that what I am proposing is too idealistic, too hopeful. Again, I disagree. Far from being an unworldly, idealistic dream, listening to each other to meet all our needs in the best possible way is about as worldly, as down to earth, as a moral agent could ever get. Having our needs met, as maternity again mutely but obviously testifies, is about as elementary a part of human life as we can possibly imagine. It is not just the case that we *might*, some day, come round to the idea that human needs need to be met. That we might toy with the idea that organising political practice to ensure needs are met, that we might experiment with it, play with a political order set up to make sure needs are met.

No. The point is much stronger, much more powerful than that. It is that there is no other possible aim for civilisation. No other rational order for human being could be conceived. And that is not a radical philosophical idea. It is a necessary truth. In the contingent world as it is, we have to have needs. And to live well, we have to do our best to meet them. There is nothing else to say or do or think. There is no other way to go.

Luckily for us, it isn't after all that far. Once the mountain of distracting perverse conceptual straw nonsense is swept aside, we'll be able to see the ethical truth of how we should live quite clearly and easily. All we need to do, is to change tack, to shift our view from darkness to light. Then at last we'll see clearly ethical truth where it has been all along. Where it could not but be. Right under our feet.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819111000404 Published online by Cambridge University Press