Just War Theory Today: Experience Required?

Cian O'Driscoll

If you don't care for obscenity, you don't care for the truth;
if you don't care for the truth, watch how you vote. Send guys to war,
they come home talking dirty.
—Tim O'Brien[1]

While the contemporary literature on the ethics of war is undoubtedly rich and sophisticated, it is marked by a glaring absence: the perspectives of military personnel who have lived, killed, and even died by the rules it enshrines. Vignettes from the frontlines make an occasional appearance in books and articles on just war theory, it is true, but there has been no sustained or systematic engagement with how people who have been in combat think about the ethical dimension of their experience.[2] This is a significant oversight. The relationship between the experience and ethics of war is fraught but fertile ground for scholars interested in just war theory. It generates a series of perplexing but also generative questions. What do we mean by the experience of war? How, if at all, is it relevant to the ethics of war? To what degree have just war theorists incorporated it into their analysis? How can they do so better? And why should they try? This article represents a preliminary effort to grapple with these matters.

The discussion proceeds in three stages. The first section defines the concept of "experience" and maps its treatment in the contemporary literature on just war theory. It contends that contemporary just war theory appears to have lost contact with the lived experience of war and highlights the problems that follow from this. The more remote just war theory grows from the lived experience of war, it warns,

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the less practical salience it is likely to have. Section two asks how just war theorists can better incorporate lived experience in their analysis. The answer it develops places war writing in the center of the frame.[3] Drawing inspiration from Martha Nussbaum's argument that moral philosophers should use the literary works of writers such as Henry James to fill out and work through their own positions, it proposes that just war theorists should engage war memoirs in a roughly similar manner. This paves the way for the third section, which road-tests this approach via a "coductive" reading of Frank Richards's celebrated World War I memoir, *Old Soldiers Never Die*. Viewed as a whole, then, this article mounts an argument for both how and why just war theorists should engage the experience of war in their ethical analysis of war. By incorporating experience into their ethical frame, it contends, just war theorists will be better able to account for the ambiguity and messiness of combat—ambiguity and messiness that simply fall out of the frame when the ethical questions that war generates are examined from a more detached perspective.

Experience Needed

"Experience" is a fuzzy but essential concept that is as difficult to pin down as it is to avoid. It is in this light that Clifford Geertz once referred to it as an "asses' bridge that all must cross."[4] Drawing on the work of Raymond Williams and Michael Oakeshott, I take experience to encompass the broad domain of how humans encounter the world and assign meaning to it.[5] As such, it refers to both the trials and tribulations that people live through and the particular forms of knowledge that they thus acquire.[6] In the context of the argument that follows, then, I use the term experience to denote the mode of insight that is derived from first-hand participation in war. My concern in this section is to examine how experience, thus defined, has been engaged by just war theorists. This task requires careful treatment, catering to different approaches to just war theory.

Our first port of call is the orthodox account of just war as it is set out in Michael Walzer's landmark text, *Just and Unjust Wars*.[7] A remarkable work for many reasons, the aspect of this work that I want to highlight here is the commitment it displays to placing the experience of war at the heart of the ethics of war. Walzer prefaces the text with the statement that ethics of war scholarship should be rooted in and responsive to the on-the-ground lived realities of combat. Just war theory must, he argues, take as its starting point how "ordinary people" encounter

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warfare.[8] In line with this, Walzer structures his analysis around a series of "historical illustrations" designed to capture for closer inspection the "judgements" that soldiers and civilians caught in the crossfire make in the heat of combat. Walzer is forthright that this way of approaching just war theory is designed to, among other things, ensure that it remains aligned with the real-world experience of warfare, especially as it bears on the men and women who are tasked to do the fighting. His interest, he tells us, lies, not in obtuse legal and philosophical debates about war, but in how regular people who have had war thrust upon them think about it. In his own words:

> The lawyers have constructed a paper world which fails at crucial times to correspond to the world the rest of us still live in. … I want to account for the ways in which men and women who are not lawyers but simple citizens (and sometimes soldiers) argue about war.[9]

This ambition informs the sources Walzer employs, which include not only academic texts on the ethics of war but also testimonial accounts by former soldiers such as Frank Richards, Emilio Lussu, and George Orwell that discuss "the experience of fighting."[10] These non-traditional texts are essential to his purpose, Walzer writes, not only because they grant him (and us) insight into "the experience of war," but also because they help him to develop his theory so that it speaks to the men and women who have endured combat in their lives.[11]

Walzer is very clear, however, that the testimonial accounts of war he engages do not, as it were, speak for themselves. Rather, they require some form of distillation or interpretation. This is where the theorist enters the picture. It is the task of the philosopher, as an ethics of war scholar, Walzer writes, to stand back from the experience of war as narrated by its participants so that he or she might discern the rules that structure it and hence impose some normative order upon it. There is an echo here, arguably, of Bishop Butler's notion of the "cool hour," the idea that the task of theorizing is best conducted at some remove from the hurly-burly of the practice it ostensibly addresses.[12] Critical distance (albeit "measured in inches not yards") is of paramount important in this respect.[13] The just war theorist, Walzer avers, "is like Wordsworth's poet who reflects in tranquility upon past experience (or other peoples' experience), thinking about political and moral choices already made."[14] Consequently, while Walzer places the recollections of soldiers such as Richards, Lussu, and Orwell at the center of his work, he does not interrogate how these men sought to make sense of their own experiences, preferring instead to

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interpose his own framework of meaning upon them.[15] In effect, he repurposes their experiences as a starting-point for his own theoretical reflections.

While the experience of war lays at the heart of Walzer's account of the ethics of war, it is largely absent from the further scholarship his work inspired. While every just war theorist has presumably read *Just and Unjust Wars*, and many have expressed their admiration for the way Walzer weaves the lived experience of combat into his analysis, few have followed him down this particular track.[16] Although virtually every aspect of his theorizing has been raked over by critics and followers alike, Walzer's commitment to centering the experience of war in ethical thinking about war has been curiously neglected.

The second approach we must consider, traditionalism, supposes that thinking ethically about war necessarily involves thinking historically about ethics. It centers the lessons of historical experience even as it neglects the lived experience of warfare. There are many exponents of this approach—among them, Christian Braun, Daniel Brunstetter, Rory Cox, Pablo Kalmanovitz, Gregory Reichberg, and Valerie Morkevicius—but most scholars would nominate James Turner Johnson as its principal architect.[17] As he frames it, just war theorizing is best approached as an engagement with the deeper historical tradition of thought from which this theorizing derives and in which it partakes. This tradition, the roots of which can be traced to classical antiquity, reflects "a fund of practical wisdom, based not on abstract speculation or theorization, but in reflection on actual problems encountered in war as these have presented themselves in different historical circumstances."[18] Engaging with tradition, then, entails familiarizing oneself with its origins and its variegated evolution, entering into a continuing dialogue with the writings of the thinkers who shaped it, extrapolating action-guiding principles from it, and adapting its insights to address contemporary challenges. Work that adheres to this template has been known to exasperate the uninitiated, who naturally want to know what the dusty texts of dead white western males, such as Thomas Aquinas and Hugo Grotius, have to do with the task of thinking through the ethical challenges posed by contemporary warfare. However, for Johnson and those who follow him, thinking with and through this tradition is vital.[19] An awareness of past just war theorizing, they posit, is a prerequisite to just war theorizing in the present. What I want to draw attention to here, however, is a particular omission from this literature. Scholars associated with the historical approach to just war theory have devoted scant attention to the lived experience of war, emphasizing instead the one-step-removed work of medieval canonists,

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Dominican theologians, and early modern lawyers over the lived realities of men and women on the frontlines.[20]

This brings us to our third and final approach. Mainstream contemporary just war theory is predominated by the revisionist approach, which treats experience as irrelevant to (and a distraction from) the task of thinking ethically about war.[21] Revisionism, as developed by scholars such as Jeff McMahan, Cécile Fabre, Seth Lazar, and Helen Frowe, is typically framed in contradistinction to Walzer's orthodox just war theory. It rejects many of the axiomatic commitments of orthodox just war theory, including, for example, the doctrine of the moral equality of combatants. Revisionists are committed to the view that a theory of just war can be constructed from first principles in a Kantian or Rawlsian style.[22] Detachment, abstraction, universalism, the presumption of *sub specie aeternitas*, and the liberal use of (occasionally ludicrous) thought experiments are the main techniques involved, and analytical rigor and argumentative precision the watchwords. Underpinning the revisionist approach is a determination to "filter out" the tendentiousness of experience.[23] It supposes that just war theorists should extricate themselves from the parochialism of their beliefs, values, and customs so that they might rise above the particularity of their circumstances and thereby acquire a more general and indeed objective understanding of the rights and wrongs of war.[24] Thus configured, revisionism reflects (and indeed is driven by) a desire to turn away from the messiness of the experience of war and toward more abstract and universal modes of knowledge. The rise of revisionism to dominance in the field is indicative of the trend toward detachment and abstraction in just war theory (and analytical political theory and moral philosophy) more generally.

The picture that thus emerges of the role played by the experience of war in contemporary just war theory is an intriguing one. While the neglect of experience may be consistent with the prevailing mode of analytical moral philosophy, it runs against the grain of recent trends in cognate domains of inquiry. Around roughly the same time that revisionist just war theorists turned their backs on the lived reality of warfare, the broader fields of War Studies and International Relations (IR) have entertained what some scholars have called "an experiential turn." Military historians such as John Keegan, Eric Leed, John Ellis, and John Lynn, not to mention Critical Security Studies scholars such as Christine Sylvester, Swati Parashar, Thomas Gregory, and Tarak Barkawi, have established the human dimension of armed conflict as a central concern within their fields of inquiry. The point to take from this is that, where experience is concerned, just war theory,

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so far as it is under the sway of revisionism, appears to be out of step with developments in IR and War Studies.[25]

The revisionist turn away from experience has elicited a critical response from a wide range of scholars who share the concern that its disconnection from the lived realities of war will be detrimental to just war theory in the long run. Walzer, for example, writes that much of what passes for contemporary just war theory can be described as more about *theory* than *war*.[26] By this he means that it has become an increasingly abstruse enterprise. While acknowledging the intellectual value of the refined form of scholarly labor that contemporary just war theorizing involves, he cautions that it forsakes the very people "for whom war is a primary subject and a personal experience."[27] Chris Brown also worries that contemporary just war theorizing has lost "contact with the realities of war," while A. J. Coates judges that the field is in danger of becoming "too theoretical or abstract."[28] This will result, Brown and Coates agree, in the blunting of its practical edge. Likewise, Kimberly Hutchings warns that "the normative evaluation of war cannot be adequate if it lacks any understanding of the flesh-and-blood experience of war."[29] Informing these points of view is the shared apprehension that the more remote just war theory grows from the lived experience of war, the less practical salience it will have.[30] This will be deleterious to its role as an action-guiding theory.

The observation arising from this brief survey is that, to the degree that just war theory engages the lived experience of war at all, it engages with it in a very distilled form. Experience is treated either as something to be filtered through the theorist's interpretative lens (Walzer, for one), filed under the umbrella category of tradition (as in Johnson's work), or detached from entirely (following McMahan and colleagues). In all of these cases, experience is reduced to a given, to something that has been *lived through* and is now available for retrospective analysis. What these approaches do not account for is the fact that experience is also something that must be *lived with*, and, as such, is necessarily incomplete, open-ended, and polyphemous. When we incorporate this more expansive account of experience, it alerts us to the messiness of the ethical dimension of warfare. What counts as the right thing to do in combat may be viewed one way by the soldier in the heat of the moment, and in a wholly different light after the fact or from afar. Indeed, the same soldier might simultaneously hold their actions to be both right and wrong, depending on the perspective from which they view them. Adopting a detached "God's eye view" on their own decisions and actions will likely yield a very different set of moral judgements than an evaluation conducted from a more "subjective"

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position.[31] Both perspectives, while mutually contradictory, can nevertheless be perfectly reasonable on their own register. Thus, a former soldier can look back on the things he or she did in their career and creditably believe them to be both wholly right and wholly wrong—at the same time.[32]

What is at stake here is illustrated by the exchange of views that Walzer and Paul Fussell traded in *The New Republic* in late 1981.[33] The exchange was in response to the publication of Fussell's controversial essay "Thank God for the Atom Bomb," in which he expressed the relief he had felt at the time of the dropping of the nuclear bomb on Hiroshima, as it had spared him and his division of the obligation to risk their lives in the invasion of Japan that would otherwise have followed.[34] Walzer expressed the view that Fussell's moral compass must be skewed: the *only* right response to the dropping of nuclear bombs on cities, Walzer avers, was condemnation. Where soldiers like the young Fussell had signed up for the fight, Japanese civilians had not, and therefore should never be the targets of annihilation. Fussell, however, repudiates Walzer's critique. Walzer, he writes, is seduced by his preference for moral tidiness into judging that actions must be *either* right *or* wrong, just *or* unjust, occasions for regret *or* celebration, but never both at the same time. Fussell, by contrast, grants himself permission to be both "horrified about the bombing of Hiroshima and forever happy because the event saved my life."[35]

Fussell's position, I want to contend, is one we must heed. While just war theorists may prefer to avoid moral confusion and perplexity by either abstracting away from experience or parlaying into a more legible, manageable form, soldiers in the field do not have this luxury. They are compelled by circumstances to not only find a way to *live with* but also to make good decisions in the context of the kind of ambiguity that Fussell himself endured in the August of 1945. Just war theory that does not take this challenge seriously has no claim, we might surmise, to itself be taken seriously by soldiers.

Seeking Experience

How can we build experience into just war theorizing? This section addresses this question. It proposes that we take Walzer's commitment to centering testimonial accounts of war as our starting point. However, where Walzer allocates the task of making sense of what these testimonial accounts tell us about the ethics of war to the theorist, the argument developed in this section is that we should instead consider how the authors of these testimonial accounts assign meaning to their own

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experiences. This subtle shift in emphasis, inspired by the work of Martha Nussbaum, will, it is hoped, allow us to move beyond "simple representative anecdotes" cherry-picked from soldier's testimonial accounts of combat, toward a more sustained engagement with the testimonial accounts themselves.[36] My purpose in the discussion that follows is to unpack this proposal by working through three questions. First, why should we prioritize the experience of soldiers at the expense of other types of actors, such as, for instance, civilians caught up in the crossfire? Second, why should we privilege testimonial accounts of combat as our preferred form of text? And third, how should we approach these texts analytically?

Opening with our first question, why should we prioritize the experience of soldiers? There is a case, which has been made quite forcefully by, among others, Lynne Hanley, Swati Parashar, and Viet Thanh Nguyen, that we should cease placing soldiers at the center of our understanding of warfare. War, they argue, is "not something experienced only by men with guns on the battlefield."[37] War affects and indeed involves a wide swathe of civilian life in a range of ways, often quite acutely. Our efforts to represent the experience of war should, we are advised, reflect this fact. To do otherwise risks perpetuating a very traditional masculinist and combat-centric account of war that "transforms the soldier into the face and body of war, when in truth he is only its appendage."[38] This line of reasoning has been picked up by other contributors to this special section—see, for example, the article by Jessica Wolfendale.[39] While admitting the power of this position, I nevertheless want to argue that there are compelling reasons for focusing on the experience of soldiers. Foremost among them, while actual combat is far less central to the practice of warfare than most people might assume, it is still the domain in which the moral questions arising from armed conflict present themselves most sharply—and the aspect of warfare to which just war theory ostensibly speaks. It is in combat that people are confronted with the stark choice to kill or be killed.[40] Soldiers, by which I mean active members of an armed belligerent group, are central to this dynamic. They are its prime movers. As such, they occupy an interesting positionality. Soldiers both "do war and have it done to them"; they are simultaneously the "victims" and "vectors" of armed conflict; the "executioners" and the executed.[41] They are also—and this is perhaps the crucial point—the agents commissioned to enact just war theory, the people expected to live, die, and kill by the principles it enshrines. Moreover, they perform this role, not as freelancing individuals, but as public functionaries acting on behalf of their communities. Finally, soldiers know war inside-out. To quote Sara Ruddick: "Soldiers know war,

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they have been there. They return from the land of the dying, speak from privileged knowledge of war's horrors and mysterious appeals, bearing witness to what most of us have not seen."[42]

This brings us to our second question: Why should we center testimonial accounts of combat as our preferred form of text? Testimonial accounts of combat can take many forms, including letters, diaries, poems, blog posts, and novels. My focus here will be upon war memoirs. War memoirs present a soldier's personal recollections of combat as an authentic record of events.[43] They offer an eyewitness account that trades on the guarantee: *You can believe it because I was there and I saw it happen.*[44] The problem, of course, is that the version of events that they present is often partial and skewed. Authorial ignorance, exaggeration, obfuscation, and prejudice are a standard feature of the genre; false testimony and faulty recall are commonplace.[45] War memoirs do not present a raw, unvarnished account of the events they ostensibly report, but, rather, offer a highly bounded, mediated, and often stylized account of the lived realities of warfare.[46] These concerns should not, however, be over-determined. The intention here is not, after all, to draw on war memoirs as reliable historical sources, but rather to engage them for the insight they offer into how former soldiers attempt to relate (that is, account for, explain, and justify) their experience of combat to a general audience.[47] The focus, accordingly, is upon the *stories* soldiers tell about their wars, not the wars they actually fought. Rationalizations, euphemisms, embellishments, cliches, factual discrepancies, and silences are not so much a problem to be circumvented as grist to the mill.[48] As Frances Houghton has put it, the "inconsistencies of recall and evident subjectivities of veteran war stories are precisely what make them a fascinating and rich source of evidence about the experience of war as it is lived."[49] They operate as "disclosures," which reveal how both the former soldier and his or her wider society seeks to impose meaning upon the experience of armed conflict.[50]

With all of this in mind, I want to suggest that war memoirs offer a complex and uniquely valuable form of insight into the experience of war. Although they are narrated from the point of view of the soldier-turned-author, this can take different forms. Combat can be recounted from the perspective of the soldier as he or she experienced it in the moment, for instance, or from an after-the-fact point of view. The former involves an active and engaged present-tense style of reportage, which contrives to recount the soldier's encounter with war as he or she experienced it in real time, without recourse to any further knowledge of the war that the narrator might later have accrued. The latter relates the experience of war in a more

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retrospective light, from an ostensibly older and wiser perspective, and often in an explicitly ruminative tone. This difference in perspective maps onto what literary scholars sometimes call "mimesis and diegesis"—or, more simply, scene and summary.[51] In practice, most war memoirs bounce back and forth between these narrative positions, alternating from one to the other. Via this movement back and forth in time, closer to and further from the action itself, the war memoir mines the looping interplay between the soldier's experience of war and his or her later reflections upon their earlier experiences.[52] They combine, as it were, what Clifford Geertz would call "experience-near" and "experience-far" perspectives within the same narrative frame.[53] The richest memoirs exploit this "double vantage point" to explore the predicament soldiers find themselves in as they confront the duality of being, on the one hand, the agent whose experiences are being narrated, and, on the other, the agent performing that narration.[54] The point to take from this is that war memoirs are a more sophisticated form of text than we might have hitherto credited: they "toggle" between experience and reflection in a manner that permits each to illuminate but also problematize the other.[55]

Our third question bears on how we should approach these texts. I argue that just war theorists might enlist war memoirs for their analysis of the ethics of war in much the same way that Martha Nussbaum argues moral philosophers should engage the literary works of writers such as Henry James and Charles Dickens. Nussbaum initially developed her position via an argument bearing on the merits of Greek tragedy as a resource for philosophers interested in the question of what it means to live a good life. She contends that tragic plays have the capacity to augment how philosophers think about human flourishing by inducing them to account for, rather than shy away from, what Nussbaum calls "the complexity and indeterminacy of the lived practical situation."[56] She expresses no doubt, moreover, that they perform this function on account of, rather than despite, their aesthetic form.[57] Precisely because of how they are staged and structured, tragedies invite us to reflect on the limitations of the human condition and the perverse outcomes that trying to do the right thing in our everyday lives can sometimes produce. We should not, however, carry this argument too far. Nussbaum cautions that Greek tragedy could never be an adequate substitute for philosophical analysis. Rather, she regards it as a supplement to more standard philosophical theorizing; a vehicle or venue for both working through the precepts that philosophy produces and calibrating them to the messy realm of practice.[58] For instance, if, as she suggests, we want to understand the concrete implications of the Aristotelian view of ethics

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for how we should approach our everyday affairs, we will find this not in the flat and pallid prose of philosophical texts but in dramatic works that seek not only to bring these questions to life but to involve us in them and thus illuminate them for us.[59] Here we come to the nub of the matter. Nussbaum extends this argument to also encompass literary works. She claims that, similar to classical Greek tragedy, novels such as those by James and Dickens can be very helpful in terms of inviting their readers to confront and work through precisely the kind of dilemmas that philosophers write about in glib, theoretical terms.[60] Key to this is the "play back and forth between the general and the concrete" that is built into the fabric of works.[61] Literary works, she concludes, should interest philosophers because they model "a style of ethical reasoning that is context-specific without being relativistic, in which we get potentially universalizable concrete prescriptions by bringing a general idea of human flourishing to bear on a concrete situation, which we are invited to enter through the imagination."[62]

While I am submitting that just war theorists might enlist war memoirs for their analysis of the ethics of war in much the same way that Nussbaum argues moral philosophers should draw on novels, I am not blind to the significant differences between the war memoirs I propose to discuss and the kind of novels that concern Nussbaum. Principally, the former is non-fiction while the latter is fiction.[63] Similarly, and perhaps even more obviously, the great novels treated by Nussbaum have an aesthetic and cultural cache that is generally lacking in military memoirs. These distinctions should, however, be no bar to doing the kind of work for which I am advocating. Just as a Henry James novel can lead its readers to both envisage themselves leading a different way of life, remote from their own, and to connect in a holistic way with the plight of the characters they encounter there, so too can war memoirs transport us imaginatively to the violent exigencies of life in a forward operating base. We do not have to recognize them as timeless works of literature to admit that they have the power to put us inside this world, so that we might experience the moral challenges it presents from the inside-out—and all of this without us ever having to leave home. Where there is a significant difference, however, is with respect to the specific work war memoirs might be expected to do for just war theorists. Nussbaum selects the works of James and Dickens because she believes that they demonstrate the power of her preferred ethical framework.[64] Her engagement with these carefully chosen novels is designed to showcase the acuity of the Aristotelian approach to ethical theorizing. This is an essentially affirmative enterprise, then, not a critical one. By contrast, the just war theorist who

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engages war memoirs will find them to be a messier and arguably less amenable form of literary product with which to work. War memoirs come in many forms and have served a wide range of political agendas; some lament the wretchedness of the battlefield, while others celebrate it as a crucible that inspires men to perform noble deeds.[65] Crucially, they are as likely to ironize, subvert, or undercut our prevailing ethical frameworks as they are to endorse them. By virtue of this, any project taken on by the just war theorist that involves drawing on war memoirs will have a subtly but significantly different character—less affirmatory, more interrogatory—than the one developed by Nussbaum.

Nussbaum's approach nevertheless supplies three helpful cues regarding the techniques just war theorists should employ when reading war memoirs. The first is that one should not read a text with a view toward isolating and analyzing certain phrases or scenes taken out of context. Nussbaum counsels against zeroing in on select passages or, in this case, instances where the terminology of just war theory is invoked. Against this, she advises the reader to focus on the ethos of a text. This can be achieved by asking "What sense of life is expressed in this work as a whole?"[66] This in turn enjoins paying attention to the way the work in question brings together the general and the particular, the issues it chooses to report upon and those it opts to exclude or gloss over, the style of writing it showcases, its narrative tempo and sequencing, the different forms of focalization it employs, and the interrelationship of its parts.[67] This is no easy task, to be sure, but just war theorists can look for inspiration to how literary critics approach it.

This brings us to Nussbaum's second cue, which bears on how to catalogue and evaluate the ethical claims developed in a literary text, or, as in this case, a war memoir. Nussbaum commends the method of "coduction," formalized by Wayne Booth.[68] The term "coduction" is a neologism which fuses *co* (the Latin term for "together") with *ducere* (meaning "to draw out, to bring out").[69] Booth, and subsequently Nussbaum, use it to denote the comparative, intertextual, iterative, dialogical, and indeed communal nature of interpreting and evaluating texts on an ethical register.[70] A "coductive" reading of a text is, it follows, never intended to be final nor definitive; rather it is offered as a platform for, and invitation to, other coductive readings, which we can then place in conversation with one another. Underpinning this way of proceeding is a pedagogical commitment to treating texts as friends with whom we can think and from whom we can learn about the world without necessarily agreeing with everything they say.[71]

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The third cue bears on the selection of texts. There should be no assumption that a given memoir will offer a window onto a generalizable or representative account of the experience of war. Rather, insofar as we engage them, it can only be to glean a sense of the particularized and concrete individual experience that they narrate. War memoirs, we must keep in mind, will not grant us access to some putative universal experience of war, but they can help us understand, one story at a time, how different soldiers have both encountered and made sense of their own wartime service.

Returning, then, to where we started, we appear to have a preliminary sketch of what an experientially grounded approach to just war theorizing might look like. Building on the foundations laid by Walzer, I have argued that the next step is for just war theorists to consider how soldiers make meaning of their own experience in the firing line. The proposal developed in this section is that this can be achieved by reading war memoirs in a manner similar to how Nussbaum engages the literary works of writers such as Henry James and Charles Dickens. The next section will put it into practice by "thinking with," that is, developing a coductive reading of, a sample war memoir. Frank Richards's war memoir *Old Soldiers Never Die* is cited by Walzer as "one of the few accounts [of World War I] by a man from the ranks."[72] It is also one of the many testimonial accounts of war from which Walzer draws historical anecdotes without ever engaging it on its own terms. Walzer extracts from Richards's text a vignette concerning the bombing of a cellar where noncombatants had been sheltering and uses it as a platform for reformulating the doctrine of double effect.[73] Walzer's argumentation on this matter is characteristically sensible and incisive. It does, however, have the effect of occluding Richards's reflections on his *own* experience, which he develops over the course of *Old Soldiers Never Die*. This makes it a suitable foil for the discussion that follows.

Experiencing the Ethics of War

Born in 1883, Frank Richards was raised in the coal-mining region of Monmouthshire, Wales. He joined the Royal Welsh Fusiliers in 1901, served in India and Burma as well as the First World War as a rifleman and signaler, and was decorated for valor, but never rose above the rank of private. He was encouraged to write by Robert Graves, who, as the officer responsible for censoring Richards's letters home, had been struck by his ability to convey the horrors of the frontline in stout

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but unpolished prose.[74] His postwar years were characterized by ill health and bitterness regarding the lack of medical support he received from the state for ailments he accrued during his service. He published *Old Soldiers Never Die* in 1933, fifteen years after the Armistice, and died in 1961.[75]

Old Soldiers Never Die details Richards's participation in World War I, which spanned 1914–1919. Right from the start, it strikes a different note to other, comparable texts—such as, for example, those by Orwell and Lussu, which Walzer also cites. Richards does not, for instance, spend any time detailing his childhood, upbringing, or even his initial decision to join the military. Instead, he cuts straight to the moment on August 4, 1914, when he received the news that he was to be mobilized and deployed to France.[76] The reader is thus launched straight into the guts of the narrative. The nature of the narrative is also distinctive. *Old Soldiers Never Die* is not a bildungsroman. It does not present a tale of personal growth, and it pays no attention to the rites of passage Richards may have endured on his course to becoming a soldier and a man. Nor is it in any way inflected by the "innocence lost" trope often identified as the leitmotif of World War I writing.[77] Rather, what we have right from the start is the tale of a self-fashioned "old soldier," who is already accustomed to the hardships of military life. The text reflects this. It imparts the story of Richards's war in a no-nonsense style that is structured around the major actions involving his unit. Chapters record their maneuvers and chart the battles in which they partook. In this respect, the text follows the format of a standard campaign history of the First World War. The writing style follows suit. Richards refrains from the use of literary devices, high diction, and interior focalization in favor of straightforward reportage on the events that he witnessed firsthand. His focus is on the unit's war, not his own subjectivity. He writes in terms of "we" rather than "I," and he does not overtly indulge in any kind of reflective analysis. This results in a perfunctory exposition of events that might have otherwise been expected to elicit a more pensive treatment. Consider, for example, how Richards records a skirmish in which he and his comrades apparently killed several enemy soldiers. "We spotted some of the enemy making their way up the rising ground and opened out with rapid fire which we kept up until we could see no-one to fire at," he writes. "We had some excellent shooting practice for about five minutes and saw a lot of men fall."[78] Instead of taking this as an opportunity to ponder the rights and wrongs of taking another man's life, Richards simply (and characteristically) moves on to discuss the victuals he enjoyed that evening.[79]

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Reflection enters the picture in the form of freighted asides. Richards expresses anger at the suffering that the German army had visited upon the French population; advocates for the summary execution of men who display cowardice in the line; offers muddled ruminations on the propriety of the use of expanding bullets; laments poorly planned attacks that lead to the "slaughter" of good men; and acerbically confirms that, while he is keen to serve his country, he would prefer to do so from the comfort of his own home.[80] All the while, the picture Richards is conveying of life at the front is becoming ever gloomier. References to battlefield gothic (such as mangled corpses and destroyed landscapes) grow both more frequent and more graphic over the course of the narrative, as do allusions to flagrant violations of the laws of war.[81] References to Richards's private thoughts are also dotted across the text. "We got into a small village," Richards remarks in one case, before adding "I had long since lost interest in the names of places we came to."[82] The shift from "we" to "I" is meaningful here, as is the lurch from factual commentary to retrospective editorializing. Later, Richards offers a dryly factual account of the losses his unit suffered from a single bombardment during the Battle of the Somme only to digress into charged political commentary: "I could only see heads and legs and mangled bodies. I have often wondered since then if all the leading statesmen and generals of the warring parties had been threatened to be put under that barrage on the day of the 20th July, 1916 … whether they would all have met together and signed a peace treaty before the week was up."[83] Offhand though they may seem, comments such as these tell us much, not only about Richards's state of mind at the time of the events being narrated but also about how he had since come to understand that period of his life. They alert us to the fact that what Richards is presenting in *Old Soldiers Never Die* is not just an account of his experiences at the front but also his own subsequent reflections on these experiences.

Reinforcing this impression, and effectively holding the book together, is Richards's use of anecdotes to capture archetypal incidents.[84] Some chapters, such as the one treating Richards's time at Bois Grenier, comprise little more than a series of anecdotes strung together with opening remarks that belie their loose emplotment—for instance, "One night …"; "We always …"; and "We had a sergeant …."[85] The anecdotes themselves generally take one of two forms, both equally interesting. The first set take the form of an extended digression that provides a detailed report of a particular action—for example, an act of bravery—only to immediately follow it with a postscript noting the (usually tragic) fate that later befell the characters involved. Richards's account of a minor incident that

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took place in June 1916 is typical in this regard: "During the day one of the men of the 5th Scottish rifles on our right noticed a wounded man of ours lying out in front who was trying to crawl back to the trench. He jumped over the parapet and ran toward him and under heavy fire of rifle bullets safely brought him back to the trench. He was awarded the VC for this *but was killed on the Arras Front in 1917.*"[86] This pattern is repeated across Richards's tales.[87] It is especially conspicuous in Richards's reminiscences on the dog that his company adopted as a mascot. Richards devotes three pages to recounting the adventures that they enjoyed with the dog while in the line before abruptly disclosing: "I may as well tell his whole story now and get it over. […] In the autumn of 1917, when we were around the Ypres Sector, he was killed by a shell splinter … He had survived four or five months in a front-line trench but was killed miles behind one."[88] Tales such as these derive their sardonic quality, and indeed their force, from the juxtaposition of the immediacy of the experience itself and how that experience appears when viewed in retrospect. The use of prolepsis to cast the story forward (beyond what would have been apparent to the narrator at the time of the events in question) so that we, the reader, can see how things would subsequently transpire for the key characters, has the effect of jolting the reader to take a wider, more cynical perspective on stories that at first blush appear exciting and heroic.

The second set includes anecdotes that take the form of near misses Richards experienced while on the firing line.[89] Viewed on a superficial level, these stories of close shaves tell us something about the role of luck and the constant risk of death on the battlefield. Examined closely, they reveal something more complex. Take, for example, Richards's account of the time in February 1915 that he and a comrade, Bolton, were assigned to a work party tasked to fetch rations from the rear and bring them to the front.[90] When the party came under heavy fire, Richards and Bolton sought cover in the nearest crater only to discover it was a latrine. There they lay until the danger passed. The rest of the party was less fortunate: they were killed at the scene. Stinking but alive, and still in possession of the rations, Richards and Bolton made their way to the line where they were greeted by the officer in charge. "We explained to him what had happened," Richards comments, "but that anyway we had saved the bread." This story can be read in two different ways. On one reading, it is a celebration of Richards's unlikely survival. He could easily have been killed, but instead he has miraculously lived to tell the tale. Wrapped in the kind of narcissism that tempts us to believe that everyone is expendable but ourselves, this story evokes the preciousness of life while also revealing the all-encompassing

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nature of our own subjective experience. On the other reading, it exposes not the preciousness of life at the front but its cheapness. It records the death of several men as incidental to the safe passage of a few loaves of bread. Moreover, these are not just any men; they were Richards's immediate comrades. So far as their lives might reasonably be traded in for a few sliced pans, Richards must know that so too could his. The same tension is evident in the story Richards tells of the death of a fellow signaler, Green, in the Givenchy trenches. Green, we are told, had refused to swap posts with Richards, only for a shell to land directly on his dugout just a few hours later. How easily it could have been me, writes Richards.[91]

Viewed as a whole, Richards's story lends weight to Anthony Swofford's observation that "the men who go to war and live are spared for the single purpose of spreading bad news when they return, the bad news about the way the war is fought and why, and by whom for whom."[92] While Richards refrains from preaching the rights and the wrongs of the war he waged, the narrative arc that he traces leaves the reader in no doubt about the moral perplexities of armed conflict. Richards's account of the part he played in the First World War charts the mounting difficulty of maintaining a grip on one's own ethical reasoning over the course of a protracted campaign. The more brutalized he and his comrades were by the war, the more their sense of self as ethical actors frayed. Indicative of this is Richards's recollection of an April 1917 morning on the Arras Front when he and some colleagues passed by a mound of between 300–400 corpses laid out for burial: "I told some of the newly-joined, who turned a bit queer at the sight, that if we were alive in a month's time, they would take no more notice of a dead man than they would of a dead cow."[93] He later describes men stooping to commit murderous acts that they had resisted perpetrating earlier in the war.[94] Again and again, he complains that the most honest soldiers were always the first to die, while the dodgers were rewarded with medals and parades.[95] And in those rare instances where worthy soldiers were acknowledged for their deeds, they were often killed in action before they had a chance to enjoy whatever glory they had earned.[96] The impression that Richards thus imparts is of a man who cares deeply about the line between right and wrong but who is worried that he no longer knows where it is located. This is of a piece with the portrait he paints of a moral vocabulary that is being turned on its head and emptied of value. By the end of the war, men are praying for the death, not of enemy soldiers, but of their own officers, and trampling their fallen comrades into the ground rather than burying them.[97] Yet Richards never repudiates the ultimate rightness of the war or his role in it; instead, he continues to take their basic justness

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as a given throughout the text. His account of the war accommodates both these perspectives at the same time, even as they pull in opposite directions.

What we might take from Richards's text, it follows, is a sense of how war memoirs can provide former soldiers with an opportunity, not just to narrate their own frontline experiences, but also to reflect on them. It makes it clear, too, that soldiers are on the hook to make decisions that are *both* responsive to the immediate context *and* likely to withstand retrospective consideration. Richards's text accomplishes this by setting his up-close-and-personal account of combat in back-and-forth dialogue with the wider, more removed perspective that hindsight now affords him. This approach reveals substantive issues that ethics of war scholars have so far swerved around but really ought to confront. It highlights the fact that soldiers do not have the luxury of viewing war from only one perspective, whether that be experience-near *or* experience-far. Rather, they are obliged to engage it in the round, by approaching the ethical challenges it presents both in the moment but also with an eye on how they will be judged both from afar and in posterity. This is an ethically fraught positionality to occupy, rife with moral hazards. It requires soldiers to grapple with the ambiguity of their dual existence as, on the one hand, men with guns who make war, and, on the other, mere cannon fodder who have war made upon them. Yet, because contemporary just war theory has turned its back on the lived experience of war, it occludes rather than engages this fundamental aspect of what makes soldiering such an ethically demanding activity in the first place. If we as just war theorists are serious about producing action-guiding theory, we must take this issue seriously.

Conclusion

By way of closing remarks, I want to offer some focalizing reflections on what we might call the *what*, the *how*, and the *why* of the preceding discussion.

What, this article has asked, is the nature of the current relationship between the experience of war and the ethics of war? It acknowledges Walzer's commitment to rooting his own account of the ethics of war in the experience of war, while also noting that this aspect of his theorizing has not generated much traction in the wider field. Indeed, it identifies a clear trajectory in contemporary just war theory away from any kind of substantive engagement with the lived experience of combat. This is curious, not just in its own terms but also because it runs counter to recent developments in cognate fields such as War Studies and IR.

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How can or should just war theorists incorporate the experience of war in their analysis? The position presented here is a simple one: just war theorists should integrate war memoirs into their analysis of the ethics of war in much the same way that Nussbaum argues moral philosophers should draw on novels. This would entail a more holistic engagement with war memoirs than just war theorists have heretofore practiced. It would involve subjecting these memoirs to what literary scholars call a coductive reading, with a view not to simply stripping these memoirs for illustrative anecdotes and vignettes but to ascertaining how people who have partaken in war assign ethical meaning to their experience in the firing line. The purpose of this, it must be added, is not to crown soldiers as the final authority on matters pertaining to the ethics of war; rather, it is simply to include their experiences, their voices, in this discourse.

Why is this necessary? This cuts to the heart of the issue. Just war theory has a tendency to transform issues bearing on the ethics of war into a neat and tidy subject-matter, one that acknowledges no messiness, no ambiguity, and no contingency. This, of course, is a function of the high-altitude character of contemporary just war theorizing. The blurred lines and moral remainders that are a necessary feature of combat simply fall out of the frame when the ethical questions that war generates are viewed from afar. This may facilitate sharper theorizing, but it comes at a cost. It divorces just war theory from the day-to-day experiences of the very people who are expected to live and die and kill by the principles it propagates: soldiers. This impedes its effectiveness as an action-guiding theory. By bringing experience back into the ethics of war, then, we can correct for pathologies that afflict just war theorizing today. Specifically, it will ensure that just war theory is sensitive to, rather than dismissive of, how soldiers encounter combat, while reminding those political leaders who would commit their nations to war to be cognizant of, and honest about, exactly what they are asking of their service personnel.

Notes

[1] Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (1990; London: Fourth Estate, 2015), p. 68.

[2] Feminist scholars have made this point over many years. "It is possible," writes Rosemary Kellison, "to read whole books on the ethics of war without ever getting a sense of the real people whose lives are impacted by the violence of war." Rosemary Kellison, *Expanding Responsibility for the Just War: A Feminist Critique* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 1. See also Laura Sjoberg, *Gender, Justice, and the Wars in Iraq: A Feminist Reformulation of Just War Theory* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2006), p. 20; and Carol Gilligan, "Concept of the Self and of Morality," *Harvard Educational Review* 47, no. 4 (1977), pp. 481–517, at p. 511.

[3] This approach builds on a slender but excellent literature. Notably, Reed R. Bonadonna, "Doing Military Ethics with War Literature," *Journal of Military Ethics* 7, no. 3 (2008), pp. 231–42.

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[4] Clifford Geertz, "Making Experience, Authoring Selves," in Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner, eds., *The Anthropology of Experience* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), pp. 373–80, at p. 374.
[5] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, new ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 83–85; and Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes of Conduct* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1933), p. 9.
[6] The definition of experience as something "lived through" draws on the pioneering work of William Dilthey. See Edward M. Bruner, "Experience and Its Expressions," in Turner and Bruner, *Anthropology of Experience*, pp. 3–31, at p. 3.
[7] Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 5th ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2015).
[8] Ibid., xxv.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., p. 336.
[11] Ibid., p. 336.
[12] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, 2006), pp. 109–10.
[13] Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 41, 226.
[14] Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, xxiii.
[15] Ibid., pp. 140–42 and pp. 152–53.
[16] This aspect of *Just and Unjust Wars* has been widely praised. See Chris Brown, "Michael Walzer," in Daniel R. Brunstetter and Cian O'Driscoll, eds., *Just War Thinkers: From Cicero the 21st Century* (Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, 2017), pp. 205–15, at p. 208.
[17] See the essays collected in Eric D. Patterson and Marc LiVecche, eds., *Responsibility and Restraint: James Turner Johnson and the Just War Tradition* (Middletown, R.I.: Stone Tower, 2020).
[18] James Turner Johnson, *Can Modern War Be Just?* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 15.
[19] For more on this, see Luke Glanville, Cian O'Driscoll, and Emily Tannock, "History, Ethics, and War: On the Moral Equality of Combatants," in "History and Theory in International Relations," special issue, *European Journal of International Relations* 31, no. 4 (December 2025), pp. 1020–42, at pp. 1026–29.
[20] Frederick Russell's classic *The Just War in the Middle Ages* is an exemplar of this style, but it is far from atypical. See Frederick H. Russell, *The Just War in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1975).
[21] The key figure within the revisionist school is Jeff McMahan, but others have also made significant contributions. For a primer, see Seth Lazar and Helen Frowe, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Ethics of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
[22] The language of first principles is derived from Cécile Fabre, *Cosmopolitan War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 12.
[23] Jeff McMahan, "Torture and Method in Moral Philosophy," in Scott A. Andersen and Martha C. Nussbaum, eds., *Confronting Torture: Essays on the Ethics, Legality, History and Psychology of Torture Today* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), at p. 197. Mathias Thaler observes that scholars employ hypotheticals precisely to "clean up the messiness of the real world." See Mathias Thaler, *Naming Violence: A Critical Theory of Genocide, Torture, and Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), p. 99.
[24] Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 197.
[25] John Keegan, *The Illustrated Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme* (London: Pimlico Books, 1976); John Ellis, *The Sharp End: The Fighting Man in World War II* (London: Pimlico Books, 1980); Eric J. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat & Identity in World War I* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1979); and John A. Lynn, *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Westview, 2004); Christine Sylvester, "Experiencing War: A Challenge for International Relations," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 26, no. 4 (2013), pp. 669–74; Swati Parashar, "What Wars and 'War Bodies' Know about International Relations," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 26, no. 4 (2013), pp. 615–30; Thomas Gregory, *Weaponizing Civilian Protection: Counterinsurgency and Collateral Damage in Afghanistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025); and Tarak Barkawi, *Soldiers of Empire: Indian and British Armies in World War II* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
[26] Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, pp. 335–36.
[27] Ibid, p. 337.
[28] 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, 2017), pp. 85–101, at p. 95; and A. J. Coates, *The Ethics of War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 11.

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[29] Kimberly Hutchings, "Just War Theory and the Martial Imagination" in Cian O'Driscoll, Chris Brown, Kimberly Hutchings, Christopher J. Finlay, Jessica Whyte, and Thomas Gregory, "How and Why to Do Just War Theory," *Contemporary Political Theory* 20, no. 4 (December 2021), pp. 858–89, at p. 866.

[30] Coates, *Ethics of War*, p. 11.

[31] On the general idea of the "view from nowhere" or "God's eye view," see Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). On subjective truth, see Robert C. Solomon, "Kierkegaard and Subjective Truth," *Philosophy Today* 21, no. 3 (1977), pp. 202–15.

[32] See, for example, John Cantwell with Greg Bearup, *Exit Wounds: One Australian's War on Terror* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2012), p. 358–59. For a less overtly paradoxical but equally morally ambivalent evaluation of military combat, see Patrick Bury, *Callsign Hades: An Irish Platoon Commander in the Most Dangerous Place on Earth* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2011), p. 278–79.

[33] The exchange is reproduced in Paul Fussell, *Thank God for the Atom Bomb and Other Essays* (New York: Summit Books, 1988), pp. 38–44.

[34] Ibid., pp. 13–37.

[35] Ibid., p. 43.

[36] Charles Altieri, "Lyrical Ethics and Literary Experience," in Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack, eds., *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), pp. 30–58, at pp. 34–35.

[37] Lynne Hanley, *Writing War: Fiction, Gender, and Memory* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), p. 124.

[38] Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016), pp. 224–25.

[39] Jessica Wolfendale, "Collateral Voices: Civilian Perspectives, Moral Injury, and the Ethics of War," *Ethics & International Affairs* 40, no. 1 (Spring 2026).

[40] This is reflected in Leo Tolstoy's reference to "the reality of war, the actual killing." Leo Tolstoy, quoted in Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (London: Allen Lane, 1997), p. xi.

[41] These phrases are drawn from, respectively, Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), p. xiii; Derek Gregory, "The Natures of War," *Antipode* 48, no. 1 (January 2016), pp. 3–56, at p. 39; and Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon, 1995), p. 153.

[42] Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, p. 250.

[43] Yuval Noah Harari, "Military Memoirs: A Historical Overview of the Genre from the Late Middle Ages to the Late Modern Era," *War in History* 14, no. 3 (July 2007), pp. 289–309, at p. 305. The focus on memoirs sits nicely alongside the recent narrative turn in International Relations and security studies. See Annick T. R. Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach* (Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, 2011).

[44] See Philippe Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," in *On Autobiography*, ed. John Paul Eakin, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. 3–30; Megumi Kato, "Testimony of War: Australian Memoirs and Fictions of the Pacific War," *Life Writing* 14, no. 4 (2017), pp. 475–84, at p. 476; and Kate McLoughlin, *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 43.

[45] As Edmund Blunden conceded in the preface to his own memoir, "confusions" are inevitable when it comes to rendering one's military experience in print. Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War* (1928; London: Penguin, 2000), p. xli.

[46] On the mediated character of war memoirs, see Devon E. A. Curtis, Florence Ebila, and Maria Martin de Almagro, "Memoirs of Women in Conflict: Ugandan Ex-Combatants and the Production of Knowledge on Security and Peacebuilding," *Security Dialogue* 53, no. 5 (October 2022), pp. 402–19; and Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (Summer 1991), pp. 773–97, at p. 776.

[47] Esin Duzel, "Fragile Goddesses: Moral Subjectivity and Militarized Agencies in Female Guerrilla Diaries and Memoirs," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 20, no. 2 (2018), pp. 137–52, at p. 142.

[48] Consider Stanley Fish's observation that "autobiographers cannot lie because anything they say, no matter how mendacious, is the truth about themselves, whether they know it or not." Stanley Fish, quoted in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 15.

[49] Frances Houghton, *The Veteran's Tale: British Military Memoirs of the Second World War* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 2. See also Samuel Hynes, *On War and Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), p. 49; and Jerry Palmer, *Memories from the Frontline: Memoirs and Meanings of the Great War from Britain, France, and Germany* (London: Palgrave, 2018), pp. 2–3.

[50] The term "disclosure" is borrowed from Myra Mendible, *American War Stories: Veteran-Writers and the Politics of Memoir* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021), p. 113. For an analysis of the interplay between how soldiers write about their wars and how those same wars are framed in collective

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memory, see Amanda Laugesen, "'So Here Is My True Story': Australian Military Memoirs and the Construction of Public Understanding of Australia's War in Afghanistan," *Australian Historical Studies* 54, no. 1 (2023), pp. 91–108, at p. 93. On the role that wider society plays in disciplining how a soldier makes moral meaning of warfare, see Aaron William Moore, *Writing War: Soldiers Record the Japanese Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013).

[51] G. Thomas Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 68–71.

[52] Randall Stevenson frames war memoirs in light of the juxtaposition of two selves: "an earlier, experiencing one, and the later one, reflective and experienced, who remembers and reconstructs the past." Randall Stevenson, *Literature & the Great War: 1914–18* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 98.

[53] Clifford Geertz, "'From the Native's Point of View': On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 28, no. 1 (October 1974), pp. 26–45. International Relations scholars might like to situate Geertz's argument alongside Vincent Pouliot's 2007 call for a new constructivist methodology. See Vincent Pouliot, "'Sobjectivism': Toward a Constructivist Methodology," *International Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (June 2007), pp. 359–84.

[54] Sven Birkerts, *The Art of Time in Memoir: Then, Again* (Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2008), p. 17.

[55] Couser, *Memoir*, p. 13.

[56] Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 134.

[57] Ibid., p. 13.

[58] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 23–24.

[59] Martha C. Nussbaum, "Exactly and Responsibly: A Defence of Ethical Criticism," *Philosophy and Literature* 22, no. 2 (1998), pp. 343–65, at pp. 348–49.

[60] Martha Craven Nussbaum, "Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy," *New Literary History* 15, no. 1 (Autumn 1983), pp. 25–50, at pp. 39–40.

[61] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), p. 8.

[62] Ibid., p. 8. There is affinity here with Hannah Arendt's use of "storytelling" as a mode of generating critical thinking. See Lisa J. Disch, "More Truth than Fact: Storytelling as Critical Understanding in the Writings of Hannah Arendt," *Political Theory* 21, no. 4 (November 1993), pp. 665–94.

[63] The distinction between fiction and nonfiction is a distinctly modern one. See Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, anniv. ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 1.

[64] Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, p. 11.

[65] War memoirs can serve a multitude of purposes, from burnishing the author's credentials for political office to expiating guilt for past misdeeds. For a survey analysis of the purposes that memoirs serve, see Rachel Woodward and K. Neil Jenkings, *Bringing War to Book: Writing and Producing the Military Memoir* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave, 2018), pp. 13–18. See also Philip Dwyer, "Making Sense of the Muddle: War Memoirs and the Culture of Remembering," in Philip Dwyer, ed., *War Stories: The War Memoir in History and Literature* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018), pp. 10–11.

[66] Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p. 233.

[67] Ibid., p. 233.

[68] Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 71–73.

[69] Terry Ochiagha, "Reconsidering Coduction: Chinua Achebe's 'Things Fall Apart' and the Spanish Lay Reader in Intercultural Dialogue," *Atlantis* 34, no. 1 (2012), at p. 102.

[70] Booth, *Company We Keep*, pp. 71–73; and Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p. 233.

[71] Booth, *Company We Keep*, p. 190.

[72] Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, p. 152.

[73] Ibid., pp. 152–54, 319.

[74] Nick Spenceley, "War Classics–Old Soldiers Never Die," *The Past*, November 9, 2024, the-past.com/comment/war-classics-old-soldiers-never-die/.

[75] Frank Richards, *Old Soldiers Never Die* (Uckfield, U.K.: Naval and Military Press, *reprint 1933*).

[76] Ibid., pp. 9–10.

[77] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and the Modern Memory* (1975; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[78] Richards, *Old Soldiers Never Die*, p. 27.

[79] Ibid., pp. 27–28.

[80] Ibid., pp. 17, 38, 78, 126, and 120.

[81] On mangled corpses, see ibid., pp. 129–30, 156, 186, 199, 226, and 269. On violations of the laws of war, see pp. 176 and 254.

[82] Ibid., p. 20.

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[83] Ibid., p. 191.
[84] The archetype is a technique that "allows the concrete instance to take on a perspectival presence not unlike what hindsight consideration would supply." Birkerts, *Art of Time in Memoir*, p. 124.
[85] Richards, *Old Soldiers Never Die*, pp. 97, 98, and 101.
[86] Ibid., p. 170; italics added.
[87] See, for example, ibid., pp. 27, 71, 97, 98–9, 143, 201, and 229–31.
[88] Ibid., p. 90.
[89] See, for example, ibid., pp. 41, 186, 196–97, 237, and 248.
[90] Ibid., p. 91.
[91] Ibid., pp. 110–12.
[92] Anthony Swofford, *Jarhead: A Soldier's Story of Modern War* (London: Scribner, 2003), p. 253.
[93] Richards, *Old Soldiers Never Die*, p. 226.
[94] Ibid., pp. 176 and 254.
[95] Ibid., p. 322.
[96] Ibid., p. 170.
[97] Ibid., pp. 195, 201, and 269.

Abstract: Contemporary just war theory is increasingly remote from the grounded realities of warfare. This is problematic because it diminishes the utility of just war theory as an action-guiding framework. This article asks how just war theorists can better incorporate the lived experience of war into their analysis. The argument it develops places war writing front and center. Drawing inspiration from Martha Nussbaum's argument that moral philosophers should use the literary works of writers such as Henry James to fill out and work through their own positions, it proposes that just war theorists should engage war memoirs in a similar manner. This argument is substantiated via a close reading of Frank Richards's World War I memoir, *Old Soldiers Never Die.* By incorporating experience into their ethical frame, this article concludes, just war theorists will be better able to account for the ambiguity and messiness of combat—ambiguity and messiness that simply fall out of the frame when the ethical questions that war generates are examined from a detached perspective.

Keywords: Ethics of war, experience, war writing, war memoirs, just war theory, ethical criticism, Nussbaum

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