

# **The Military's Institutional Teleology: Defending the Common Good**

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## Introduction

In today's paper I examine the institutional purpose of the military. I propose that the morally responsible State uses its military to "defend the common good."

In the first section, I examine some different ways to understand the teleology of the military as a social institution. When I refer to the "teleology of the military," I simply mean the institutional purpose or ends for which it exists.

Then, in the second section I argue that a state's military should defend the common good of the political community it serves, which includes, but is not limited to, fighting wars against external aggression.

## Approaches

### *a. Kill people and break things*

One approach to understanding the institutional purpose of the military is to argue that it is a blunt instrument of government that exists to *do harm*. That is, the purpose of the military is, as U.S. presidential hopeful Mike Huckabee described it, to "kill people and break things."<sup>1</sup> This might be termed the *Doing Harm* approach to understanding the purpose of the military. Rupert Smith, a former NATO General, suggests that military force does not have an absolute utility, other than its basic

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<sup>1</sup> Janell Ross, "Mike Huckabee Says the Military's Job Is to 'Kill People and Break Things.' Well, Not Quite.," The Washington Post, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/08/07/huckabee-says-the-militarys-job-is-to-kill-people-and-break-things-well-not-quite/>.

purposes of killing and destroying.<sup>2</sup> When military force is employed, according to Smith, it has only two immediate effects: it kills people and destroys things.

The military ethicist George Lucas Jr points out that it is part of the warrior mind-set to think that their job is to “kill people and break things.”<sup>3</sup> But this type of “warrior mind-set” can confuse the unique means of the military with its institutional purpose.<sup>4</sup>

For example, Smith goes on to argue that the *true* measure for the utility of military force is whether or not the death and destruction it causes serves to achieve an intended political effect.<sup>5</sup> He argues that lack of coherence in purpose (or between purpose and force) is a major reason for the failure of using force. According to Smith, every military force is constructed with a political purpose, which is normally outlined in security policy, defence strategy and military doctrine. In conjunction with certain amounts of troops and materiel of specific qualifications, he suggests that this shared political purpose creates a coherent military force.<sup>6</sup> Smith holds that we need a military force as a basic element of our lives for two generic overarching purposes: defence and security. In other words, he suggests we need a professional military institution to defend our homes and ourselves and to secure our interests.<sup>7</sup>

But it is muddled thinking to argue that the *telos* of the military is both to destroy *and* to create a political effect. Even in war, the military’s destructive capabilities

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<sup>2</sup> Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (Penguin Books Limited, 2006), 18.

<sup>3</sup> George R. Lucas, "Postmodern War," *Journal of Military Ethics* 9, no. 4 (2010): 296.

<sup>4</sup> As I pointed out in Section 4.3, there is a similar argument in police ethics from Egon Bittner: that the purpose of the police is to use coercive means. But this is not the only (or even the main) role of the police.

<sup>5</sup> According to Smith, “In order to apply military force with utility requires: a) an understanding of the context in which one is acting; b) a clear definition of the result to be achieved; c) an identification of the point or target to which the force is being applied; and d) an understanding of the nature of the force being applied.” Smith, 6.

should always be subservient to its political purpose. The military's capability to kill and destroy is *not* a purpose in itself. It is rather a necessary means to a political end. So it is *not* true to say that the purpose of the military is doing harm.

***b. Warfighting***

Another approach to describing the teleology of the military is the *Warfighting* approach. This is the view that the purpose of the military is to fight and win wars. Andrew Bacevich, for example, says that military forces exist to win wars.<sup>8</sup> Most Western strategic theorists argue that the primary purposes of the military is to deter, fight and win wars. *Eliot Cohen? Colin Gray? Tom Mahnken? David Kilcullen? Aaron Friedberg? Lawrence Friedman?* If this is true, then the military should *only* be trained and equipped to fights war.

But the military serves other important purposes besides fighting wars. The military are sometimes used to exert force short-of-war in operations that encompass a wide-range of tasks, including peacekeeping, supporting civil authorities, counter-terrorism, protection of humanitarian operations, enforcement of sanctions, and so on and so forth.

The military institution also plays key peacetime roles. For example, Defence Attaches are often part of diplomatic staffs where they are sent to all parts of the world to play an important role in statecraft. In such positions, their purpose is international military engagement rather than being involved in warfare.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew J. Bacevich, "The Us Military Does Everything – except Win Wars," The Spectator, <http://www.spectator.co.uk/2014/10/the-us-military-should-be-winning-wars-not-fighting-ebola/>.

Furthermore, it is problematic to give an institution an explicit moral purpose to do something that ultimately one wants to avoid. It is better (strategically and ethically) to avoid the destructiveness of war if there is another way of achieving the same political goal.

*c. Defending the State*

A third approach for understanding the teleology of the military is the view that it carries out the State's responsibility for defending the "common life" of a political community from external aggression. This is the conventional Just War view and it is most clearly reflected in Michael Walzer's theory of interstate aggression. So I refer to it here as the *Conventional* or Walzerian approach. State aggression, Walzer says, threatens international society directly and, unlike domestic crime, there is no independent law enforcement to police it: the member states of international society must rely on themselves and on one another.<sup>9</sup> The rights of the member states must be vindicated, concludes Walzer, because it is only by virtue of those rights that there is a society at all. Someone must be held responsible for breaking the peace of the society of states.<sup>10</sup> That is, when a political community resorts to armed military force it should do so in order to become less vulnerable to territorial threats, safer for jurisdictional inhabitants and more politically independent in its self-determinations.<sup>11</sup>

But Walzerian's have a difficult time explaining how a political community has a right to defend its "common life" against aggression that justifies the use of military power. David Rodin, for example, has recently undermined the Conventional approach

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<sup>9</sup> Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 61.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

by attacking the commonly accepted notion that states have a right of national-defence.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, advocates of a more cosmopolitanism approach to international ethics have criticized the communitarianism of Walzer's view. Charles Beitz argues that this approach to international ethics involves a philosophically unacceptable and empirically misleading conception of the State. He suggests that it is philosophically unacceptable because it holds that the State's moral character is unaffected by domestic injustice. And he believes it is empirically misleading because it treats the state as an enclosed sphere in which processes of change proceed with little outside influence.<sup>13</sup> From this cosmopolitan perspective, the disproportionate concern of states to protect their own citizens, to the exclusion of the security needs of outsiders, is judged to be unjust and unnecessary.

#### ***d. Peacekeeping***

Such criticisms have led a number of authors to reconceptualise the teleology of the military in more cosmopolitan terms. I refer to this fourth approach for understanding the moral purpose of the military as the *Peacekeeping* approach. This suggests that the purpose of the military is to preserve a just peace and protect human rights. Larry May, for example, suggests that the use of military force is sometimes necessary to "restore human rights protection and peace in a region of the world."<sup>14</sup> And

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<sup>11</sup> Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 121.

<sup>12</sup> Rodin, 132.

<sup>13</sup> Beitz, 416.

<sup>14</sup> May states that "In general, I wish to indicate why there is a problem about war over the centuries, namely, that war is strongly condemned but also seen as allowed, or at least excusable, in some few cases. Indeed, in those few cases, such as when a State uses military force in self-defense or defense of

Chris Brown says that striving for a just peace might be a more useful end for justifying war since it assumes that people have a right to live together in communities in peace and justice. He says that if peace and justice are the norm, then acts that violently disrupt them must be addressed. Therefore, Brown concludes that the use of military power is morally justified when it seeks to preserve peace and justice.<sup>15</sup>

Since the Peacekeeping approach to the use of military force is more concerned with the humanitarian rights of people outside the jurisdiction of a given political community, it puts more of an emphasis on armed humanitarian intervention. Lorraine Elliott and Graeme Cheeseman suggest that the cosmopolitan argument for armed humanitarian intervention rests on the claim that “individuals are bound together in humanity as a single moral community which, in constituting a ‘community of fate,’ provides the basis for relations of obligation among them.”<sup>16</sup> This view gives particular emphasis to the inherent worth of being human. That is, according to Onora O’Neill, “all human beings have equal moral standing.”<sup>17</sup> In contrast, O’Neill argues, a communitarian view is less likely to favour armed humanitarian intervention because moral duties are owed “only or mainly to others in the same community, which they define in terms of descent, culture or common citizenship.”<sup>18</sup>

But Cosmopolitan criticism does not give enough credit to the virtues of a communitarian view. Brown acknowledges the contribution of prominent cosmopolitan theorists such as Charles Beitz in widening the systematic moral debate. But then he

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others, these wars are not only justified but may even be required.” Larry May, *Aggression and Crimes against Peace* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 5-6.

<sup>15</sup> Brown, 104.

<sup>16</sup> Lorraine Elliott and Graeme Cheeseman, "Cosmopolitan Theory, Militaries and the Deployment of Force," *International Relations* (Canberra: The Australian National University, 2002), 7.

<sup>17</sup> Onora O’Neill, *Bounds of Justice* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 190.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

argues that Beitz makes the mistake of too quickly discounting the worth of non-cosmopolitan views.<sup>19</sup> It is difficult to argue, for instance, that political communities themselves are somehow intrinsically bad. Participation in community is crucial to the development of virtue in many instances. It is also through the experience of social relationships that we can learn moral values such as altruism.<sup>20</sup> Elliot and Cheeseman argue that the universality of cosmopolitan understandings of humanitarian rights does not preclude “local attachments and particular loyalties.”<sup>21</sup> And Andrew Linklater argues that some degree of inclusion and exclusion is necessary for a political community to exist.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, the mostly likely means for delivering armed humanitarian intervention is from the political communities with a monopoly on the use of military force – national militaries, coalitions of states or the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) – who are driven by mostly communitarian concerns. It is true that we are seeing the growth of Private Military and Security Contractors (PMSC). But states are likely to maintain their monopoly on the effective use of military force for some time yet. The monopolisation of military force by states is a deeply ingrained (both morally and legally) characteristic of the international system. And the military capability of states remains unrivalled, especially by the more powerful states.

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<sup>19</sup> Chris Brown, "The House That Chuck Built: Twenty-Five Years of Reading Charles Beitz'," *Review of International Studies* 31 (2005): 379.

<sup>20</sup> Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*.

<sup>21</sup> Elliott and Cheeseman, 19.

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Linklater, "The Problem of Community in International Relations," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 15, no. 2 (1990).

## The Morally Responsible State

### *a. Defending the common good*

Therefore, I propose that the purpose of the State's military should be to defend the common good of the political community it serves, which includes, but is not limited to, fighting wars against external aggression. But the ongoing discussion about humanitarian intervention demonstrates that the State has some moral responsibilities to the common good outside its own narrowly defined political community. Importantly, it has a moral obligation, albeit weakened in comparison with insiders, to use military force to protect the lives of outsiders.

Thomas Aquinas suggests that the business of soldiering is directed to the protection (*tuitionem*) of the entire common good (whereas other matters in the State are directed to the profit of individuals).<sup>23</sup> Aquinas says "wars are lawful and just in so far as they protect the poor and the entire common weal from suffering at the hands of the foe."<sup>24</sup>

The State military's primary obligation in defending the common good should be the security of the political community it serves. The State has a duty to protect its jurisdictional inhabitants and citizens from threats and this is the moral foundation for state-sanctioned acts of force. The State has a particular role in safeguarding the lives of "insiders." As Nicholas Thomas and William Tow remind us, it is the wellbeing of

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<sup>23</sup> Aquinas, "Just War and Sins against Peace," 187.

<sup>24</sup> Summa Theologica, Second Part of the Second Part, Question 40. War.

insiders that constitute the State's reasons for being.<sup>25</sup> And this does include defending a political community by fighting wars against external aggression.

But states have some moral responsibilities to the common good outside defending their own political communities. In particular, a state has some moral obligation to use military force to protect the lives of vulnerable outsiders. This is an expanded notion of the common good. Walzer, for example, describes this in terms of a "higher duty" of soldiers,

*"The soldier, be he friend or foe, is charged with the protection of the weak and unarmed. It is the very essence and reason of his being . . . [a] sacred trust.' Precisely because he himself, gun in hand, artillery and bombers at his call, poses a threat to the weak and unarmed, he must take steps to shield them. He must fight with restraint, accepting risks, mindful of the rights of the innocent."*<sup>26</sup>

#### ***b. Problems?***

Any attempt to balance a state's moral obligations to both insiders and outsiders faces a number of problems, however.

**First**, finite resources – including time, money and awareness – cannot hope to meet the limitless humanitarian needs in the world. The cosmopolitan impulse to help outsiders can easily lead to a despairing or cynical view when confronted with the sheer scale of humanitarian need in the world. Although a state has a much greater capacity to help outsiders than any individual, attempts to take obligations to outsiders seriously

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<sup>25</sup> Nicholas Thomas and William T. Tow, "The Utility of Human Security: Sovereignty and Humanitarian Intervention," *Security Dialogue* 33, no. 2 (2002): 190.

is going to result in some selectivity. Any lack of consistency in humanitarian interventions is open to the charge that they are arbitrary and based on a political whim. But acting in some cases is better than acting in no cases at all. At least some victims are saved and some criminals are punished. And, as Pierre Hassner points out, it potentially deters others by showing that the norm of non-intervention does not guarantee their impunity.<sup>27</sup>

**Another potential problem** is that the complex variety of moral obligations create confusion when the motivations and values underlying action are unclear (or even contradictory). Brown acknowledges that mixed motives can undermine humanitarian efforts, particularly when they are “accompanied by ethnocentric, racist assumptions.”<sup>28</sup> Such moral uncertainty makes decisive action difficult and can be a cause of fragmentation and disagreement. But then Brown argues that it is unreasonable to expect that for an action to count as humanitarian, the motives must be completely “pure.”<sup>29</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the military’s institutional moral purpose is to defend the common good. A state military’s primary obligation is to defend the common good of its own political community. But it also fulfils a state’s moral obligations to protect the lives of outsiders. The recent refocusing of moral obligation on armed humanitarian

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<sup>26</sup> Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 317.

<sup>27</sup> Pierre Hassner, "Violence and Ethics: Beyond the Reason of State Paradigm," in *Ethics and International Affairs: Extent and Limits*, ed. J. Coicaud and D. Warner (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2001), 91.

<sup>28</sup> Chris Brown, "Humanitarian Intervention and International Political Theory," in *Human Rights and Military Intervention*, ed. A. Moseley and R. Norman (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2002), 155.

intervention is necessary in an international system dominated by states and discussion of their national self-interests. Cosmopolitanism reminds us that all human lives are equally valuable. But it also needs to be balanced by the realities of communitarian obligations in order to avoid becoming so individualistic that it ignores the moral responsibilities that militaries owe to the political communities they serve.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 154.

## **Additional Points**

### Communitarian Walzer

Walzer's conventional approach is criticized for being underpinned by a communitarian view of international ethics. Joshua Cohen argues that Walzer's view is communitarian because he is saying that membership in communities is an important good and that the primary subjects of values are particular historical communities.<sup>30</sup> In other words, communitarianism relies on the notion that the State is the primary form of political community and its physical borders are the legitimate boundary of justice and moral obligation.

### Humanitarian Intervention

Deen Chatterjee and Don Scheid suggest that, with the end of the Cold War, humanitarian motivated military interventions have increased in number as intrastate conflicts have become more frequent and interest in the idea of human rights has become more extensive.<sup>31</sup> According to Chatterjee and Scheid, armed humanitarian intervention refers to the coercive action of one party – usually a state, coalition of states or the United Nations – in the political affairs of another party for a humanitarian purpose. That is, the use of force is primarily motivated by a concern to “rescue and protect people in a foreign territory from gross violations of their basic human rights”

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<sup>30</sup> Joshua Cohen, "Spheres of Justice by Michael Walzer," *The Journal of Philosophy* 83, no. 8 (1986): 457.

<sup>31</sup> Deen Chatterjee and Don Scheid, *Ethics and Foreign Intervention* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4.

rather than for self-defence or “out of any interest in political domination, territorial acquisition, or the like.”<sup>32</sup>

#### East Timor example

For example, the 1999 Australian-led armed humanitarian intervention in East Timor reinforced the value of foreign military protection when it successfully rescued the East Timorese people from suffering and intimidation. According to Tom Frame, this intervention “provided a model for restoring the political, legal and social conditions in which human rights are respected and security and order can be re-established.”<sup>33</sup> This moral obligation to protect the lives of outsiders, however, is weaker than a state’s primary duty to defend the political community it serves.

#### Mixed intentions

Brown says the following about the problem of mixed intentions,

*One of the effects – intended or not – of emphasizing the alleged desirability of non-arbitrary rules is to legitimize a black-and-white account of the moral universe under which actions are either wholly altruistic or wholly selfish – and since states are never wholly altruistic this move is usually the prelude to a denial that altruism can be a factor at all in the conduct of international affairs. Contrary to this absolutism, there is no reason to think that when states act to right a wrong they may not also be motivated by self-interest. Motivation is a complex process and about the only thing*

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>33</sup> Tom Frame, *Living by the Sword? The Ethics of Armed Intervention* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004), 19.

*that can be said with certainty about it is that there is never simply one single reason why anyone does anything.*<sup>34</sup>

Questions?

Symbolic role of military in national identity? E.g. Gallipoli. A reason for being for the military?

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<sup>34</sup> Chris Brown, "In Defense of Inconsistency," in *Ethics and Foreign Intervention*, ed. J. Coicaud and D. Warner (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 46.

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