

RETHINKING THE UNTHINKABLE

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In this irritating and illuminating book William O'Brien has deliberately taken on a job as difficult as it is unstylish these days. He is trying to define moral norms for warfare. He knows what he is doing, and he knows that his first job is to persuade skeptical readers that it is worth doing.

War and/or Survival, by William V. O'Brien.
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The basic contention comes early in the book—in italics: “*Man must accept the reality and necessity of armed coercion as a fact at every level of society. Man must learn how to limit and channel armed coercion insofar as possible in the interests of the community, at every level, in order to survive.*”

Anybody who takes that position, as O'Brien well understands, is subject to assault—the military metaphor is appropriate to this subject—from two groups of opponents. First, there are those who say that the real atrocity is war and that morally concerned men must work not to establish a morality of combat but to eliminate it. This group includes traditional pacifists, nuclear pacifists, and new-style idealists who say that the time has come for a leap past the age-old ways of armed conflict. Second, there are the militant hard-liners for whom victory is the aim of war and who justify any necessary weapons and conduct in the name of military expediency. This group includes most full-time militarists and, when the squeeze is on, most everyone physically or emotionally involved in war.

Thus doves and hawks cooperate to downgrade the subject of this inquiry: when is war justifiable and what are the moral ways of fighting? But exactly these questions, says O'Brien, require disciplined thought. They, more than the grand ideological issues, are the actual ethical questions that confront mankind day in and day out.

The Reaffirmation of Christian Realism. O'Brien is well aware that “Christian realism,” once an innovative movement, later the conventional wisdom of most churchmen, is not quite *au courant* these days. If rather few refute it, many modify it, downgrade it, or try new languages that give at least the appearance

of originality. O'Brien is not concerned to be vogueish; he bluntly affirms his Christian realism and tells why.

His reason is that all known political systems involve the use of power, one form of which is armed force. Despite occasional hopes and predictions, no new alternatives are in sight; in fact, the options involve rearrangement, not elimination of power. If some day a radically new politics (involving a radically new human nature) should appear, fine. Meanwhile, we live in a world of power and have ethical responsibility for the use of power.

In such a world there are two possible moral justifications for war: the right of defense and the right of revolution. This does not mean that every defensive or revolutionary war is justifiable. But the minute anyone acknowledges that *any* military defense or revolution is moral, the question is no longer “Is war ever ethical?” but “When is war ethical?”

By coupling defense and revolution, O'Brien uses a valid logic to expose the excessive rhetoric of contemporary argument. For example, those who condemn a specific military action may say, “Stop the killing,” to use a current slogan that O'Brien examines. Such an imperative has real power—and I, for one, hope that it never loses its power, because killing is an awesome act. But anyone who uses it must ask what he really means. If he morally rejects all killing, he has a right to his language. However, if he wants to stop Americans from killing Vietnamese but justifies Israeli killing Egyptians, or if he wants to stop both American and Israeli soldiers but supports Latin American guerrillas, he has abandoned the pacifist logic. His judgments may still be right—a point to be settled on other grounds—but what he means is “Stop this particular killing,” not “Stop the killing.” Here he is on O'Brien's grounds: the grounds for determining in what circumstances killing is justifiable.

This reasoning leads to a devastating criticism of oratorical unreality and the “well-intentioned nonsense” of much of the teaching of the church on war. (One reason I have called the book irritating is that most of us at some points take solace in unreal rhetoric.) As a Roman Catholic, and a seriously devout one on the evidence of his writing, O'Brien criticizes the declarations of the church he knows best. Even so honored a statement as Pope John's *Pacem in Terris* does not escape his criticism. As a Protestant reviewer

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I can assure him of the accuracy of his suspicion that most Protestant pronouncements are similarly vulnerable. One trouble is that in condemnation of war or abhorrent acts of war churchmen frequently resort to grandiose generalizations that they do not really believe or expect to live by—a well-meant dishonesty that has its own ethical problems. Another trouble is the failure “to consult secular empirical disciplines when grappling with extremely difficult problems.”

If defensive war and revolutionary war are sometimes permissible, the moral questions have only begun. When and in what ways is it moral to fight? The author believes that “all recourse to armed coercion must be limited in ends and means in every way possible.” Not all ends are valid. And if some ends justify some means, no ends justify all possible means. So the question requires close analysis of the purposes of war and the morally responsible ways of military defense and revolution.

But before coming to that issue O'Brien must face a question. He is arguing for a Christian realism. Is it realistic to expect a nation to restrict itself to “limited war,” the only war that is morally responsible? Or will not nations resort to any means that will enable them to win? Has the realist become a utopian in asking for restraint after validating armed conflict?

O'Brien grants that this is a tough question, that “the prerequisites for limited wars are extremely difficult to meet and maintain,” whether on the battlefield or on the homefront. Conceivably, he concedes, the whole effort may belong to the theatre of the absurd. But he plugs away diligently at the job. And he states or implies two reasons for the effort. The first is that nations do, in fact, accept self-limitations in war—not as many as they should, but some. (Despite the excesses of American military destruction in Vietnam, excesses that O'Brien criticizes, the Air Force did not, in fact, destroy the dikes of North Vietnam or follow the advice of the General who proposed bombing the country back into the Stone Age.) The second is that it is the business of the church and moral agents to advocate moral responsibility, even though such advice may not be heeded.

The detailed treatment of the morality of war falls under two categories, nuclear war and revolutionary war. Each deserves consideration.

Nuclear War and Deterrence. On nuclear war O'Brien starts with the assumption, now almost universal, that “general nuclear war is unthinkable as a rational instrument of policy.” But he sternly rejects any conclusions favoring unilateral renunciation of nuclear weapons. All such “pious hope” he considers “immoral,” for the reason that the most powerful prevention of nuclear war is the fear of deterrence.

And a credible deterrent requires both nuclear capability and the will to use it.

In my judgment he has here stated the paradox that haunts the world. Nuclear warfare is an incalculable evil, but it is prevented by the deterrent capability to commit incalculable evil. This is a highly unsatisfactory situation, but I have found nobody who knows the way out of it.

In moving to more detailed judgments O'Brien, consistent with his over-all logic, favors (1) reducing incentives to war and (2) agreements for arms control, but rejects grand plans for general disarmament. And he devises some ethical “rules of nuclear warfare.” The first rule is no first use of nuclear weapons. If this rule is obeyed, there will be no nuclear war; but since it is now obeyed primarily because of deterrent capacity, there must be further rules that insist upon graduated rather than all-out deterrence, a “no cities first” prohibition, and efforts at agreements on arms control.

The discussion, although tightly reasoned, is in my judgment over-confident. In a shrewd bit of self-criticism O'Brien acknowledges: “I, for one, can write about the morality of nuclear war and deterrence, because I doubt that there will ever be a nuclear war, certainly not a major one.” Why does he say that? He is not overly optimistic by nature; he grants that thoughts about China can lead to “deep depression.” But, he says candidly, “we are all optimists about something.” And that, he knows, is not a good enough reason. I can agree that rational and responsible statesmen will not initiate nuclear war; but if we could count on rationality and responsibility among statesmen, half this book would be unnecessary. Meanwhile we live with the risk of insane acts, which increases with nuclear proliferation. O'Brien does not analyze the *n*th nation problem—the issue of the point in proliferation when nuclear war becomes more probable than not—although he favors agreement on non-proliferation, even while he sees all the difficulties in such agreement.

I do not mean that I can answer the dilemma that this book analyzes well. But I think peace based on deterrence is at best an insecure respite and a way of buying time until the human race finds a more adequate solution. I am more grateful than O'Brien to the peace movement for keeping the urgency of that task before us, even though I concur in his specific criticisms.

Revolutionary War and Counterinsurgency. As a matter of fact, O'Brien points out, the world has seen no nuclear war since 1945, whereas it has seen almost continuous revolutionary warfare and counterinsurgency. Hence he proceeds to an original and incisive

analysis of the ethics of this type of conflict.

The discussion starts from two premises. First, there is a human right of revolution against tyranny, but not all revolutions have good purposes or can achieve goods proportionate to their cost. Second, societies have a right to protect themselves against reckless insurgency, but not all counterinsurgency has valid aims or justifies the costs of violence. Therefore it remains to be determined in any specific instance whether revolution or counterinsurgency is morally justifiable.

Next comes the most disturbing point. Revolutionary and counterinsurgency warfare are by nature "dirty." Since no government is likely to let revolutionaries mobilize openly for a direct attack, revolutionaries must use the terrorist tactics of guerrillas. Likewise counterinsurgency cannot preserve the traditional distinction between warriors and noncombatants, because it is the nature of guerrillas to fade indistinguishably into the population. So O'Brien confronts us with a painful dilemma: there is no honesty or sense in supporting revolution or counterinsurgency while denying the moral right to use the only tactics that can make such warfare effective. In particular, it is irresponsible for Christians to endorse, for example, a revolution, then avert their eyes at the time of tough decisions and leave it for non-Christians to do the dirty work. So the book undertakes the brave task of defining the moral limits of terrorism, torture of prisoners, and the various tactics that go with guerrilla warfare. Many readers will feel revulsion at this point, but such feelings are no answer to the agonizing questions that are inherent in the case.

O'Brien's specific political judgments are not necessarily inherent in the logic of his case, but I had better mention them since, for many readers, they will—wrongly, I think—vindicate or undermine his ethical method. Knowing that he is not courting popularity, he basically accepts the U.S. case in Vietnam, while indicating doubts about its prudence and specifically criticizing the misuse of firepower. He flatly opposes the U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965.

Concluding Reflections. By persistently asking unpleasant questions O'Brien will lead some people to reject his whole enterprise and return to the position that it is war, not particularly military atrocities, that must be abolished. But he will not let his critics rest there. How do they propose to abolish war? By a transfer of power to an international authority? Then they face the same problems: what ethical restraints will guide the supreme authority in enforcing its decisions on revolutionaries who oppose them? There is no place to hide from such questions as these.

That does not mean that O'Brien's answers are always as powerful as his questions. His principal ethical guidelines are traditional: there must be no unnecessary cruelty and no cruelty disproportionate to the values sought. To anyone with any ethical sensitivity, those principles are scarcely debatable. The more difficult question is: at what point in combat do you refrain for ethical reasons from doing something that would significantly help you gain the goals of your fighting? In O'Brien's reasoning "legitimate military necessity" makes permissible, if not exactly good, most acts that actually contribute to the end sought. Most acts, but not all. There are moral restraints, hard to define, but important. O'Brien's cogent response is that sheer situationalism, with no rules, quickly degenerates into sheer expediency.

One of his important concepts is that of the threshold. Nuclear weapons on military targets may be less evil than "conventional" blockbusters on cities, but experience has made the nuclear threshold one that men ought not to cross. Similarly napalm and chemical-biological warfare may be significant thresholds.

On this issue I would give more importance to the symbolism of certain acts than does O'Brien. I think, on the basis of some military experience, I might prefer to die by napalm than by bayonet—although I do not crave the choice. Surely napalm is not always more wicked than bayonets. But events have made napalm an important symbol for modern man's conscience. In a conscience-hardened era, it becomes important to maintain such symbols, perhaps more important than to give them strict logical scrutiny. In so emphasizing symbols I am probably making ethics more of an art, less of a science, than O'Brien. But I do not disdain the scientific and logical components he develops.

One principal virtue of this book is the author's boldness in offering his opponents the openings they want. Could there be a better way to offend religious critics than to enter into a discussion of the justifications and limitations of military torture of prisoners? Should not a Christian ethic disown such tactics utterly? O'Brien persistently keeps questioning. Would you *never* torture a prisoner—even if, for example, by torture you could gain information that would spare a civilian town from vicious military destruction? And if, in such a case, you would torture, would you not even then maintain some ethical inhibitions in respect for the humanity of your foe? I would rather not think about such questions, but O'Brien will not let me off the hook. I cannot dismiss the questions as artificial, because conscientious men are facing them wherever guerrilla warfare goes on. His aim is not to please but to clarify.