Are Weapons of Warfare Evil in Themselves?

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Abstract: With the advancement in weapon technology and movement of major powers to increase military outputs, some people have begun classifying new weapons of warfare as ‘evil in themselves’. Under various international agreements such as the Geneva Convention and the Certain Conventional Weapons treaty (CCW), the use of some weapons have been outlawed in domestic and international war due to the magnitude of the destruction they cause. This destruction can be measured by the uncontrolled harm inflicted on innocent people resulting in unjustifiable suffering. Hence are the weapons evil? This paper will show that evil exists not in the weapon itself but in its careless application. If civilians become the collateral of weapons of warfare then the action of discharging the weapon is evil. Often the magnitude of destruction caused by weapons of warfare such as cluster bombs, landmines and tactical nuclear weapons cannot be fully controlled so it could be argued that there are no ethical grounds for legalising their usage.

Key words: Civilians • Destruction • Ethics • Just War

INTRODUCTION

Developing new and advanced weapon technology for major powers such as the United States, China and Russia in order to increase military outputs has resulted in some people classifying new weapons as evil in themselves [1]. Evil will be categorised as a deliberate attempt to be unequivocally negative in process and outcome.

This paper will focus on three specific weapons of mass destruction: landmines, cluster bombs and tactical nuclear weapons which have been criticised as being evil [1-4]. Under various international agreements such as the Geneva Convention and the Certain Conventional Weapons treaty (CCW), the use of some weapons have been prohibited in domestic and international war due to the magnitude of the destruction they cause [5].

The main determining factors of inhumane weaponry are whether they have uncontrollable affects in harming innocent people and if they cause unjustifiable suffering [1]. Although some weapons have been deemed inhumane by international bodies [3], the contention in this paper is that weapons are not inherently evil. Evil exists not in the weapon itself but in its careless application in the battlefield. That is, if civilians become the collateral of weapons of warfare then the action of discharging the weapon is evil.

Moral Framework: There is no doubt there is excessive loss in war, in terms of lives and devastation to civilisations. Forge’s [6] analysis of weapon research states that “killing and enabling killing are blameworthy under all conditions” p. 532. This forms a common moral framework that people may subscribe to but there is a need for closer scrutiny before blame can be assigned so broadly.

Often the evils of war are not distinguished from the weapons used as they are perceived as synonymous [6]. However the onus should be on the actual usage rather than the weapons themselves. An example is a comparison between a tactical nuclear weapon and a gun. Guns are weapons commonly used in warfare domestically and internationally. It is commonly known that the United States constitution protects the right to bear arms. Guns have become an entrenched element of the US society [7]. Their usage, although horrifying, have become somewhat normalised. Like tactical nuclear weapons, guns have been used to maim and murder millions of people [7].
Therefore, is it morally correct to regard tactical nuclear weapons as any more evil than guns? If the subject of either of these weapons are innocent civilians, then that usage is evil.

**Plausible Grounds:** Introduced and analysed in this section are three plausible grounds that claim weapons of war are inherently evil in themselves. As part of this analysis, the plausible grounds will be described in terms of their actual plausibility and whether their validity can be discounted.

One plausible ground claims that some weapons do not discriminate between combatants and non-combatants [8]. Another plausible ground claims that some weapons cause unnecessary suffering and a third plausible ground claims that some research on weaponry promotes evil results [9]. By critiquing each ground it will become clear that weapons do not hold inherent evil, rather, their application needs to be precise so no evil can occur.

**Distinction:** The plausible ground of distinction claims weapons are evil because they cannot distinguish between combatants and non-combatants [10]. Non-combatants are typically defined as civilians or people who are innocent to the operations of war [8, 10]. A soldier in a warzone is not permitted morally or legally to target non-combatants [8, 10].

The application of weapons in war is defined and limited in the Just War Theory. The Just War theory framework established *jus in bello* which dictates the behaviour of parties engaged in war [8]. The theory partly works on the basis of distinction between combatants and non-combatants [8]. However, some weapons inadvertently result in non-combatants being killed or injured by weapons. An example of this is cluster bomb munitions. The cluster bomb is a new type of war machine that works by targeting vast areas quickly and effectively [11]. Sub munitions are ejected which are smaller bombs with precision guidance systems to avoid environmental factors like weather [11].

As recently as May 2015, Saudi Arabia was criticized for using cluster munitions in Yemen. Saudi Arabia is not a signatory to international conventions banning cluster munitions [12]. Literature like the Cluster Munitions and International Law book states that 98% of those suffering the consequences of cluster munitions have been civilians [8].

Although cluster bombs are precision guided, an inbuilt feature is that they may not automatically detonate when they reach the ground [8]. Instead, the bombs can lie dormant until a person or object comes into contact with it [8]. Hence non-combatants become the unintended casualty. This highlights a potential contrast to the Just War principle of distinction that weapons should satisfy in war. Anti-cluster mine groups have classified cluster munitions as inherently evil because they have resulted in the death of non-combatants [12].

The death of non-combatants should always be mitigated. The onus of responsibility to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants falls on the human discharging the weapon rather than the weapon itself. As previously discussed, *jus in bello* is established to ensure that wars are fought justly [13]. If this is to be presumed, then states should not engage weapons and actions that cause non-combatants to be major casualties of military conflict. This includes the ethical use of cluster munitions, so they can only be used in non-civilian areas where there is no likelihood of civilian casualties. An example would be an enemy army positioned in a desert with no civilian areas within the radius. If cluster munitions are deployed, only the combatants become potential casualties. If cluster munitions are deployed near civilian areas, the wielders must ensure all remaining bombs are removed or better still, not used at all if it cannot be guaranteed that civilians will not be harmed.

It could be argued that the use of cluster munitions on combatants is ethical under the Just War theory and *jus in bello* framework, given the correct circumstances. Therefore, cluster munitions are not evil in themselves, rather the evil resides in the careless use of this type of weapon by the wielder. The Just War principle of distinction should place an onus on the human discharging the weapon rather than the weapon itself [5]. This may lead to cluster munitions only being utilized in very specific controlled circumstances or simply not at all.

**Unnecessary Suffering:** The claim that poses the plausibility of weapons being evil in themselves is that some weapons can cause unnecessary suffering [3], [8], [11]. Unnecessary suffering occurs when *hors de combat* is taken too far, rendering the combatant out of action but also inflicting undue stress and harm [9].

Unnecessary suffering is classified unjust under the Just War principle [8]. If a group is fighting a just war it would not be conducive to the war effort if the enemy is
unnecessarily suffering. The aim in a just war is to win not to make the enemy suffer unduly. With landmines as an example, the validity of the claim that weapons are evil in themselves will be tested by highlighting that it is the people using the weapon that potentially cause unnecessary suffering regardless of the type of weapon used.

In 2014, the United States made a pledge in an anti-mine conference to phase out landmines from active use [4]. This is in accordance with the global movement to reduce the use of landmines worldwide [4]. As Giannou [14] states in his submission to the British Medical Journal, the use of landmines has “disabled individuals, handicapped families and mutilated entire societies” para 5.

A landmine is a bomb that is charged to explode when it has been moved or stepped on by someone or something [15]. However, the exact result of landmines can sometimes be unclear. Anti-landmine activists claim that instead of killing the subject, many are left with deformed bodies and reduced quality of life [15]. This suffering lends itself to the plausible ground for classifying weapons like landmines as evil. Although the effects of landmines should not be understated, it is the actual usage of the weapon that causes harm to people.

As the word ‘weapon’ implies, a weapon is used to harm others and all weapons have the capability to maim and hurt [14, 15]. An example of this is to revisit the use of guns, this time when compared to landmines. The same argument applies in that for some societies, such as the United States, owning guns is not only perceived as acceptable but also a civil right [7]. Yet, like landmines, guns have caused suffering in families, societies and civilisations [7]. Therefore, why would landmines be considered any more evil than guns? A landmine can explode and kill the victim relatively quickly. A gun can do the same. However, if used incorrectly, both can inflict undue suffering, harm and evil to the recipient.

There is a moral understanding outlined in the Just War theory framework that undue harm and suffering caused by the use of weapons of war should be limited. Therefore, if a state is made aware that weapons are being used to cause unnecessary suffering, it is the states responsibility to stop the action as it is in direct violation of the Just War theory framework [8]. Even the approach to Consequentialism theory would suggest that causing unnecessary suffering is generally not justified because the intention of war is to win, not to maim. Consequentialists would only prescribe the use of undue suffering in war if it results in the best consequence for their cause [16].

**Weapons Research and Nuclear Weapons:** The premise for the plausible ground that claims research on weaponry promotes evil, is based on how the weapon is then utilised. After the first atomic bomb was dropped on Japan in 1945 during World War II, President Truman of the United States stated “The greatest scientific gamble in history, and we have won, but the greatest marvel is not the size of the enterprise, its secrecy or its cost, but the achievement of scientific brains in making it work” [17]. President Truman was claiming that science had triumphed in partly ending World War II with the creation and use of the atomic bomb [17]. The quote signifies the new age of weapon creation and usage in the international warfare landscape.

The scientific movement towards weapons of mass destruction has led some to question the nature of weapons research [6]. Anti-nuclear weapon activists claim that nuclear weapons are evil due to the mass deaths that can occur [5]. The pursuit for nuclear weapons was finalised with The Manhattan Project which was a covert United States military programme during the 20th century [18]. The atomic bomb was created to tip the balance during World War II in favor of the United States [18]. Very simply, nuclear weapons harness the power when atoms are split to create a nuclear reaction [18]. Although mechanics were used previously in weapon manufacturing, the atomic bomb represented a new scientific approach to warfare [19]. This approach has been criticized for blending the lines between science and weapons [6] and fosters the view that weapons and weapons research are evil in themselves in terms of outcome and creation.

Weapons research related to the creation of the atomic bomb has been heavily criticized but more emphasis should be placed on regulating the justification for weapons usage and creation [6]. The primary question facing weapons research is associated with the offensive or defensive nature of weapons. That is, weapons research is sometimes labelled as a defensive means of protection hence justifying the increase of mass weapons of destruction [6]. However, in many cases this research has an offensive purpose. Forge’s [6] ‘The Morality of Weapons Research’ isolates the discussion between first and second order morality. He contends that weapons research is justified if “the results will only be used as a just means in a just cause” p. 531. Forge [6] appeals to the second order morality in his argument that engineers have a responsibility to ensure the negative nature of new weapons aren’t extreme.
Prudence should be exercised both in weapons research and weapons usage. In other words, weapons research is not in itself inherently evil. The reasons for creating and using nuclear weapons on innocent non-combatants is evil and reinforces the theme of this paper which is for people to exercise extreme caution in the use of weaponry.

CONCLUSIONS

“I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones” Albert Einstein, p. 173 [20]. This quote represents the grave importance for our world to ensure evil does not triumph over modern weaponry. In this paper it has been found that weapons do not hold evil in themselves but only with extreme precision. The by-product of the need for precision means that it may never be justifiable to use these weapons as it is often impossible to guarantee the safety of innocent people.

REFERENCES