JUST WAR THEORY AS IDEOLOGICAL AND COMBATANT ROLE CONFUSION

Recent work on the morality of war focuses primarily on the conditions that must be met in order for a particular war to be justified. These have included: the overall costs and benefits, the nature of the leaders’ intentions, the probability that peace will ensue as a result of the combat, the fact that no other means could have been used other than military combat, and finally that combat be used as a last resort. (FN 1 Cady) But as the pragmatic pacifist argues, (FN 2 Cady) given the carnage and tremendous suffering war brings about in its wake, as a matter of fact, these conditions can never be met, i.e., there can never be a just war. The costs will always outweigh the benefits, and the violent means by which peace is pursued cannot logically or factually be considered as a separate state apart from the end. As Cady describes this relationship, the end subsumes the means. Cady concludes that both the general pursuit and everyday practices of positive peace need to replace the millennia-long pursuit of peace through war.

My objectives in this essay include:

1. To demonstrate how just war theory, i.e., also known as warism, (that war is both morally justifiable in principle and often morally justified in fact) (FN 3 Cady) functions in our lifeworld as a fundamental assumption, and as such, how it’s perceived as irrational to question its validity;
2. To show why this state of affairs implies its ideological status;
3. To analyze the difficulties in assessing the morality of role acceptance and role fulfillment on the part of the combatant in light of the status of just war theory; and finally,
4. To discuss the impact of being a combatant in the wars fought in the U.S. in the last 50 years on a soldier’s understanding of his or her role responsibilities, i.e., role conflict and confusion.
Jurgen Habermas’ work on communicative action is an important starting point for the analysis of the standing of just war theory, i.e., that war can be justified under the above-mentioned conditions. (FN 4 Habermas) Communicative action and fruitful dialog among citizens is made possible by the existence of certain limits: these are the common assumptions a political community shares that enable dialog to get off the ground in the first place with the aim of possible consensus. He argues that “Communicative action takes place within a lifeworld that remains at the backs of participations in communication. It is present to them only in the pre-reflective form of taken-for-granted background assumptions…” “It is an implicit knowledge that cannot be represented in a finite number of propositions; it is a holistically structured knowledge, the basic elements of which intrinsically define one another; and it is a knowledge that does not stand at our disposition, inasmuch as we cannot make it conscious and place it in doubt as we please.” (FN 5 Habermas)

Habermas contends that in addition to being grounded in shared lifeworld assumptions, communicative action is able to approach consensus because we also share certain assumptions about rational argumentation that enable us to take a different perspective on, and a different evaluation of, our own needs if and when we hear the interpretations of the needs others have with respect to the issue at hand. He assumes that when we are engaged in dialog with others about public policy issues, we are open-minded enough to be persuaded by the force of the best argument, i.e., the one which has the strongest support for the existence of a particular set of (most weighty) needs.

Considering whether the hypothesis that warism functions ideologically in our American culture requires discussing whether or not:

1. It can be proven false when challenged by facts about the real objectives of a particular military engagement or about whether or not the objectives have been fulfilled; e.g. with regard to the current military occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan, facts showing that the occupations have not stemmed the rise and proliferation of the Al Qaeda movement, yet do not falsify the view that the war is justified. (FN 6 Stewart)
2. Unclear language has been used to obfuscate the reality of mission success, or make it impossible to assess whether the mission or broader goals of the war have been achieved. A recent example of problems with measurement and obfuscation can be seen in former Homeland Security Advisor Frances Fragos Townsend’s response in a CNN interview about whether or not Osama Bin Laden had been located yet: “It’s a success that hasn’t happened yet. I don’t know that I view that as a failure.” And consider the problems with former secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld’s response to the lack of evidence regarding weapons of mass destruction in Iraq: “The absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence. . . Simply because you do not have evidence that something does exist does not mean that you have evidence that it doesn’t exist.” (FN 7 Cathcart and Klein)

3. There are known objectives and functions that are being served that have little to do with achieving justice or democracy in the areas of military occupation (appealing to a Marxist analysis of benefits accruing to ruling class interests).

The issue of just warism viewed from the perspective of Habermas’ theory of the lifeworld differs slightly from a Marxist perspective on ideology, because of Habermas’ emphasis on:

   a. The belief’s relationship to other fundamental beliefs; i.e. that they are all of a piece; as well as
   b. The conceptual and logical difficulties involved in articulating assumptions that may operate on an unconscious level.

The hypothesis of just warism is bound up with several beliefs that remain largely unchallenged in our culture, in particular that national self-defense requires the use of force, either the direct application of physical violence or weaponry, or the threat of using these as a deterrent to potential lethal aggression. This in turn implies that such deterrence or defense cannot be accomplished, at least in the short run, by the power of moral integrity, exemplified by one’s fidelity to one’s commitments, (e.g., to regional or international associations or agreements); honesty; or the courage to speak forthrightly and clearly about one’s actions,
goals and commitments. These views about military versus moral power’s effectiveness as a deterrent to war in a state of nature (including the states comprising the international community vis-a-vis one another) have functioned in the Western lifeworld in the unquestioned legitimacy of the Hobbesian social contract. A single absolute unquestioned political leader is viewed as the only solution to the problem of the status of the international community being that of a state of nature, and concomitantly a state of war. In the U.S. it is Congress’ prerogative to declare war, yet this has been interpreted to mean that its role is to formally announce a military engagement that has already been decided upon by the President. Hobbes argues that without such an absolute executive, disagreements will result over particular policy decisions, thereby putting the political community in a state of nature, which is also a state of war.

Historical figures such as Gandhi, M.L. King, Jr., and Aung San Suu Kyi have received international respect and idealization, but rarely have been called to lead the international community to solve problems in that community nonviolently. So, when Hobbes and contemporary writers agree that the person who’s authorized to declare war must be strong enough to muster consent by the public, they’re referring to their power to produce consent and acquiescence, not moral influence. Hobbes argued for the absolute sovereign’s right to determine not only which battles are worth fighting, but also to have the authority to determine what’s right and wrong, just and unjust. Furthermore, Hobbes argued that the unanimity required by the urgency of such decisions can only be achieved through the mechanism of the absolute executive. Given that this version of the Hobbesian social contract still operates today, albeit tacitly in many nation-states, it’s not surprising that so little discussion occurs in the public sphere in the U.S. regarding the morality of particular military engagements. Our acceptance of an increasingly powerful executive regarding the conduct of the military is an essential feature of our tacit acceptance of just warism. Hobbes’ own conflation of what’s rational to do in a state of nature with what’s morally justified is instructive here.

Several reasons can be given for the claim that acceptance of the possibility of a just war (i.e., that there could be a war that fulfilled all the above necessary
conditions for justifying war) functions as a lifeworld assumption as well as ideologically in ours (and most) societies. First, Cady’s analysis supports this view in his claim that there is no dialog about just war issues in our society. (FN 8 Cady) He argues that common objections to pacifism are posed in the form of a claim that anyone who would take an absolute stance against war must be naïve, foolish, even dangerous. Although Cady argues that this type of objection is logically irrelevant (fallacy of personal attack), his argument supports the idea that one’s stance on the validity of just war theory functions as a means of separating the rational from the irrational citizen. So, although this attack can be dismissed as obviously fallacious, its frequency and persuasive power play an important role in setting limits to genuine dialog as grounded in canons of rationality. Even the discussion of other political issues, arguments or agendas, can get short shrift when the validity of a particular existing military engagement is under fire. From a Marxist perspective political leadership could be viewed as holding its citizenry hostage to concerns about self-defense in the face of international aggression, rather than responding to citizens’ other concerns, i.e., unemployment, recession, quality of life issues, etc. One could be viewed as irrational for focusing on global warming, universal medical care, etc. when we’re at war in two very incendiary places. (FN 9)

Secondly, in his analysis of the variety of versions of just warism and pacifism Cady maintains that except for absolute versions of pacifism (which are rarely held), most arguments from both positions hold that war can be justified in principle, given the above-mentioned pre-requisites, but not as a matter of fact. But the fact of apparently diverging positions differing only minimally can be used to support this view of the ideological standing of warism in our society, i.e., namely that the very different starting points of warism and pacifism regarding the morality of war don’t matter, just the conclusions of their respective arguments. Cady also describes the absolute pacifist argument that all war is intrinsically evil as being grounded in religious or metaphysical claims about human nature being intrinsically valuable, and killing as intrinsically wrong or evil. Yet by classifying these arguments in this way, Cady inadvertently supports the
view that the “logical” foundations of absolute pacifism are themselves incapable of being logically demonstrated.

Thirdly, there are certain notable lifeworld assumptions here about human worth and dignity that function as the foundation of our Constitutional body of law dealing with substantive civil and political rights. Although constitutional jurisprudence is filled with controversial discussions of the rights of persons due to their moral worth and dignity, no such dialog has emerged in our public sphere about whether sending troops into dangerous and traumatizing battle zones in morally unjustified military engagements violates their basic dignity and intrinsic value. Yet the statistics indicating that between 1/5 and 1/4 of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans return to the U.S. with serious cases of PTSD would suggest that having one’s psyche and brain so radically and negatively altered by combat experience is tantamount to an endangerment or destruction of their moral personality and personal dignity. Given this possibility, it’s astonishing that the U.S. Veteran’s Administration has consistently denied seriously injured and psychologically maimed vets the basic medical care and disability benefits that they deserve, considering that the combat experience had a causal role in producing many of their injuries. (FN 10 Schram) My objective here is to question the moral status of American military institutions which put combatants into the role of playing Russian Roulette with their lives and well-being in the cause of fighting an unjustified war.

A reductionistic Marxist perspective would claim that the government’s attempts to refuse to engage in a dialog about whether or not benefits are deserved is based solely on the obvious financial and political benefits for the ruling economic class. Instead, I’m suggesting that a dialog regarding how refusing genuine claims of disability is a violation of veterans’ rights as bearers of human dignity. Such a dialog could result in questioning the basic assumption of just war theory: namely, that putting combatants in the role of fighting wars of questionable moral validity (i.e., indeterminate with regard to total costs and benefits to future generations) is not a denial of their moral worth and value. And, as argued above, the proverbial well is poisoned against anyone who questions a particular war’s legitimacy by the claim that it’s irrational to question the validity of just warism.
Just warism as a lifeworld assumption is further demonstrated by this separation of the rational (those who agree it could be justified in principle) and the irrational (those who claim it never has and never will be justified as a matter of fact or principle). When there exists disagreement about what is rational versus irrational, this constitutes a fundamental challenge to existing norms of rationality and irrationality, upon which agreement is essential to communicative action. Norms of rationality are the paradigms of lifeworld assumptions, because normative argument and communicative action couldn’t occur without agreement on these concepts or their applications. And because of their centrality to one’s ability to communicate and to one’s physical survival and psychological flourishing, they occupy a portion of sacred ground upon which a person is hesitant to subject to critical evaluation. Yet, the conception of rationality that the pacifist’s critics are arguing for relies on the assumptions comprising their political theory, and is strongly grounded in Hobbesian social contract theory. Given the disorienting impact in a society engaged in a reconsideration of what rationality requires, it would seem to qualify as a likely example of Habermas’ lifeworld assumptions.

Once this claim about rationality requiring an unlimited executive has been asserted, the empirical issue of whether the particular conditions for a just war have been met becomes moot because it is not necessarily the basis for the absolute leader’s decision. For example, an unlimited executive could decide that a military occupation is an essential element to retaining power and hegemony in an international community of warring, unstable nation states. And rather than determining whether the conditions of just war have been met, it’s the Hobbesian belief in the necessity of an absolute sovereign power to deter instability that’s decisive. Not only is its ideological status supported by its apparent unfalsifiability, its functioning ideologically as interpreted by Marxist theory can be revealed in the well-known economic benefits the conducting of war provides to the capitalist enterprise. Those benefits include money spent on the defense industry for weapons, artillery, mines, planes, ships, helicopters, drones, bombs, tanks, military research and testing. In addition, the possibility of total war functions to dismiss objections to a particular administration’s call to
arms based on its rationalization as a deterrent to other nations’ use of their nuclear weapons. Once again, it’s viewed as irrational to ignore claims that a given military threat or actual military engagement is essential to staving off nuclear war, given that in absence of realistic predictions as to the specific conditions that might provoke a nuclear state to use nuclear weapons, rationality calls for opting for the maximin strategy (when probability can’t be known, the strategy that avoids the worst outcome). Yet, that the appeal to the maximin strategy calls for military engagement which is in turn predicated on questionable factual assumptions about deterrence (including deterring irrational political actors) the probability of military success, unintended consequences and cultural responses to military occupation.

Given that it’s obvious that a nuclear attack is the worst case scenario that must be avoided, and given the absence of probabilities about its occurring, nations must rely either on the “educated guesses” of academia or of those in the Pentagon, given the classified or unobtainable nature of the state of conventional and nuclear weapons held worldwide. Yet this state of affairs violates the conditions of justified ethical policy-making from the perspective of Habermas’ theory of communicative action, which would seem to call for national dialog among all relevantly affected members of society. (FN 11 Winters)

In addition, the existence of non-rational extremist actors, e.g., suicide bombers, with possible access to nuclear material and/or weapons, provides an additional basis for U.S. citizens to question the validity of scenarios regarding the possible outcomes of nations conducting conventional or nuclear wars justified by military experts. In essence, we’re relying on a cadre of experts in the Pentagon for giving the executive advice on policies for dealing with other nuclear powers. Those experts may have a great deal of knowledge about previous military successes and failures, but it’s not obvious that they have been experts on the history, culture and worldview of the nations which currently may possess nuclear capability, all of which are relevant to the issue of cost-benefit. Relying on an outdated model of deterring rational heads of states to forego violence when confronted with a seemingly inexhaustible source of military power and resources violates one of the basic precondition for justified policy-making: having the
requisite information about the need interpretations of all relevantly affected by a decision.

Section Two. What were they thinking?

J. Glenn Gray’s analysis of the psychology of men in battle illuminates the factors that contribute to the soldier’s state of moral conflict, moral confusion and exasperation, and finally moral insight and clarity for some, or for others, moral degradation and cynicism. (FN 12 Gray) Essential elements include:

1. The recognition that everyone around him depends on him for protection, and views him as a “center of force, a means of security and survival... His moods and dispositions are affected by the presence of others, and the encompassing environment of threat and fear. He must surrender in a measure to the will of others and to superior force.” (FN 13 Gray)

2. The acknowledgement that one has taken an oath requiring him to obey as essential to maintaining one’s positions and succeeding in one’s tactics in the midst of chaos, confusion, extreme fatigue, hunger, boredom.

3. The finding of oneself in situations in which no matter what choice is made with regard to one’s options, the results of any choice will seriously endanger those around him.

4. The frequent occurrence of a disconnect between mandates of the superior officers who issue the orders and the reality on the battlefield; (FN 14 Wright) and lastly,

5. The recognition that in certain situations if one follows clearly illegal and immoral orders, one will have “crossed a line” with regard to losing one’s moral center and integrity. (FN 15 Wright)

Gray interprets the occurrence of guilt on the part of combatants as a result of a soldier’s looking inside himself and recognizing that although his options and voluntary choices may be extremely limited (e.g., disobeying orders can result in
arrest, detention, and in some military forces, torture or execution) he could have
done better in registering his moral repugnance with the orders. Whether this
would be sufficient to rectify the soldier’s action will be discussed below.

Gray’s description and analysis of moral conflict, demoralization or conversion,
includes several points about personal guilt and blame as well as about collective
responsibility. These are most clearly articulated in his concluding chapter on the
future of war vs. genuine peace. The state of genuine peace implies the absence
of states of preparedness for future military engagements. Given the insidious,
seemingly intractable hold warism has in our culture, he claims it would require
the dynamism of an institution with as strong of a hold on our collective
conscience as warism currently does. He further claims that two particular
psychological dispositions or propensities keep us tied to the military defense
system: fear and hatred. Furthermore, he attributes war-making as part of our
nature as humans, apparently in agreement with Freud on this issue. In addition,
he cites as basic human desires the desires for adventure, excitement, spectacle,
self-sacrifice for the sake of the community, and in general, the emotional surges
and excesses that war brings to our lives. (FN 16 Wright) Yet he leaves open the
issue of what such peace-making institutions might be; obvious candidates for
such a role would seem to include:

national community service programs, which could provide opportunities
for service to the local, national or international community, and which would
provide challenges and opportunities for those who are struggling with issues of
meaning and personal identity;

religious institutions’ eschewing of warism and which articulate virtues of
forgiveness, tolerance, compassion, enlarged sense of community, courage not
tied to risking one’s life in combat; (FN 17 Borradori)

educational institutions, which would provide a critique of the masculinist
interpretations of certain virtues (e.g., courage and loyalty) and of the mindset of
combat and which would offer challenges to the assumptions of history texts and
the choices regarding curriculum regarding the inevitable necessity of war and
cycles of retribution and revenge;
and finally, supports for parenting which would provide alternative models of courage, self-sacrifice and adventure for the sake of the community. Given that parenting is an essential element in developing moral integrity and personal identity, it could play a necessary role in criticizing those idealized depictions of soldiering which could result in putting their children in danger of losing their moral center if they enlist and are deployed in combat.

None of the roles occupied in the above-mentioned institutions are likely to place its actors in a situation that would compromise their integrity, let alone put into the dangerous position of losing one’s moral center entirely.

Despite the value of his analysis of guilt among soldiers in combat during WWII, Gray ignores several issues central to a discussion of collective blame and responsibility. First, given the avowed self-destructive nature of fear and hatred, Gray never points out how the role of combatant is articulated and sustained by military institutions and internalized in the forms of intense fear and often absolute hatred, defined by Gray as hatred that exists without awareness of the concrete circumstances of the despised enemy. It would seem that most soldiers go into combat without a clear, accurate perspective on the cultural, economic, social and political circumstances of their enemies in combat. (FN 18 Wright)

Furthermore, the moral implications of the resulting state with regard to the changed cultural and moral understandings of traumatized vets rarely reaches the level of conscious awareness in the collective conscience if and when it ever reaches the level of public discussion.

Secondly, Gray does mention that in order to attain a collective psychological conversion to genuine peace, a strong leader would be required to enable this transformation to occur. This is because even though a political leader himself could be open to eliminating militarism, this leader would not be psychologically strong enough to fail in his role as a Hobbesian “ultimate bodyguard.” Yet this assumption about the head of state’s primary role as defender is itself question-begging, given that it functions at the same level and with the same power as the unquestioned nature of warism. Such a leader would believe his or her only choices are:
1. Keep military forces and use when perceived as necessary for the sake of security and tamping down fear; or

2. Eliminate the military forces and instead use reasoning and regional and/or international alliances and agreements to tamp down fear and hatred. Neither one of these options as stated includes a description of the further problem of the immoral, and potentially self-destructive role into which government and military leaders place combat troops for the sake of reducing fear in those who will not enter the military. Consequently, because the assumptions regarding what is necessary for waging a successful war regarding soldiers’ mindsets (i.e., loyalty, obedience) themselves go unchallenged as a result of the ideological nature of just war theory, a militarized society must be held responsible for the predictable self-destruction, demoralization or alternatively psychological conversion that can be predicted to occur.

Thirdly, despite the authority and power of Gray’s analysis of the psyche of the soldiers fighting in WW II, there is a surprising dearth of discussion of the special moral role of veterans in bringing their narratives to bear on the discussions in the public sphere regarding the legitimacy of ongoing military solutions to political problems. For example, Gray claims that one of the possible outcomes of a soldier’s experiencing actions that violate all possible aspects of a person’s dignity and value is that of hatred for humanity in general. He argues that witnessing the execution of hostages, torturing of POW’s, and the mass murder of civilians in the “liberation” of villages, can thwart permanently the sense that human nature has any redeeming features. Alternatively, refusing to participate in such inhumane, horrific actions can alienate one’s comrades and deprive the soldier of the only moral support and interactions with humanity essential to psychological survival in battle. But his critical evaluation of these morally problematic battlefield experiences and insights fails to address whether the role that veterans and soldiers must play is immoral or evil. However, Gray documents many cases in which playing this role can cost a soldier his moral personality and integrity.

Gray’s test case is that of World War II, which many would argue is the only just war occurring in recent times, given the horrors of Nazism had to be stopped.
Yet, he contends that once a soldier becomes a part of a battlefield unit, whatever views that person had about the justice of the military conflict, or about the possibility of bringing about a successful military outcome using certain specific tactics becomes irrelevant, because the only goal soldiers aim for is winning the war while saving the lives of his comrades. The same holds true for many enlistees’ motivations for signing up for military duty” desire to keep up a family military tradition, finding personal meaning in an otherwise mundane life, providing service to one’s country. (FN 19 Wright) It soon becomes apparent that their main objective is to win the war (whether or not this produces justice) and this is accomplished by sticking to the missions’ objectives more narrowly specified. Gray claims that if one’s mission isn’t clearly articulated, soldiers may fail to adopt the role of soldier willing to sacrifice his life for the sake of his comrades-in-arms. Yet narratives about combatants in Iraq and Afghanistan reveal real problems with the perceived relationship between questionable orders and mission success, yet do not mention resulting defection or failing to protect others in one’s unit. (FN 20 Last Letters Home)

Nowhere does he mention that if and when a soldier realizes he’s not fighting a just war, the soldier will be demoralized and may decide for that reason to forsake his comrades. This is because regardless of the original mission and broadest objectives to be fulfilled by the war, soldiers come to realize that their primary duty is to keep their comrades and themselves alive. But this is stated and maintained throughout the book, without asking whether self-sacrifice is warranted in the course of fighting an unjust war. His response to moral arguments that self-sacrifice might be better understood as an evil is that it may be an impulse “not subject to rational judgment and control.” (FN 21 Gray) He doesn’t address the further question of whether the moral value of self-sacrifice must be assessed in light of the avowed goals of the mission; and so to the extent the war is not morally justified, the value of self-sacrifice would be compromised or eliminated. In essence, I’m arguing here that the role of soldier as a vital element in achieving justice and ultimately peace through conventional warfare has been replaced in recent wars by the role of soldier as contractual bodyguards and killers essential to saving as many lives of one’s countrymen as possible in the
fighting of unjustified wars. Rather than explicating the transition from the avowed, original role to the subsequent one, Gray’s focus is primarily on the moral transformation undergone by various combatants when realizing that the specific actions required to take are blameworthy. The prior philosophical question of whether it’s an immoral role to be put in or to accept is not broached.

Another aspect of role confusion in his experience in combat in Italy and France is revealed in the emotional and psychological changes that combat troops endured when they were dealing with civilian populations in these countries. He argues that American soldiers regularly switched from cruelty and barbarism towards some collaborators, to love, tenderness and compassion towards others within a timeframe of only moments. He explains these moral lapses as due to the occupying of the role of functionary. Those lapses are attributed to cowardice when the role enactment involves closing one’s eyes to their freedom and responsibility to act morally. In his discussion of the atrocities committed by the Nazis and Fascists during WW II, he claims they were “all arrant cowards who say they were forced to do what they did. I am tempted to think that the key to the whole rotten mess (the occurrences during WW II) is lack of courage and (presence of) fear. Cowards best understand the psychology of fear.” (FN 22 Gray)

But he minimizes the moral degradation that must have occurred in those who were committing horrific acts of abuse, when he concludes, “Being a functionary is not entirely foreign to the nature of the majority of us.”(FN 23 Gray)

The transition from one’s original motivations for participating in combat for reasons of personal meaning and identity in the fulfillment of one’s country’s broader justified military and political goals to that of keeping those in one’s unit alive is described by Gray in his claim that there occurs a transcendence of the self when soldiers experience a merging of the self with that of the group. Readiness to die for the sake of saving others is explained by Gray as resulting from transcending the moral self and identifying with a heroic immortal self who survives death.

What’s missing in this analysis of a soldier’s psychology in combat is the issue of whether these motivations to experience the sublime are affected at all by the
recognition that the war being fought is not morally justified after all. Although he reports the experience of recognizing that the enemy soldiers may be no more evil or guilty than oneself, he doesn’t explain how a person can enjoy an expansion of the self in a mystical union with others in one’s unit, if one no longer believes in the justice of the cause he’s fighting. It’s as if the issue of it being a just military engagement loses its urgency as well as its meaning, and focusing on the issue becomes a real disvalue, once survival issues take over. Gray does not examine the possibility that one’s role and purpose in combat might be viewed as analogous to a mercenary or hired killer for purposes of aggrandizing power, other’s property, money, or other self-serving national motives. As such the achievement of the transcendent expansion into the sublime, when such achievement presupposes a commitment to ends higher and greater than those of the individual self, would therefore be sacrificed.

Peter French argues that in the assessing of a soldier’s moral blame and responsibility for deaths occurring in the fighting of an unjust war in the following of legal orders to destroy a suspected enemy dwelling, there is an “inference gap” between these facts and a conclusion regarding a combatant’s moral blame. (FN 24 French) Although this is true, given that more premises are needed regarding the soldier’s state of mind, French’s analysis falls short of providing a clear idea of what’s needed so as to close the inference gap. In his construction of a hypothetical case involving the unjustified killing of an innocent civilian, he fails to discuss the possibility that an autonomous soldier would realize that:

1. The particular assault may be justified according to the rules of engagement, but not as part of justified war as defined above;
2. His hatred for all citizens living in the enemy zone could be preventing him from carrying out his orders in a more humane, perspicacious way; (in French’s example an innocent woman is killed as a result of such hatred);
3. His only options are to follow orders or to be found guilty of desertion, and subject to a dishonorable discharge;
4. His primary moral duty while in service is to save the lives of his fellow combatants on the battlefield.
From French’s perspective, without stating what’s missing in the inference gap, it would seem to be possible that a soldier, after recognizing that he may be killing people unjustly and needlessly (not necessary for saving the lives of his comrades), may nevertheless be morally justified or morally excused for the killings. If what French is considering is the likelihood that soldiers are not acting fully voluntarily in their roles (given their lack of reasonable alternatives once deployed into combat), this fact would be relevant to his blame, which would be mitigated by such relative involuntariness. However, after such critical reflection occurs on the part of an autonomous soldier, he could begin the process of figuring out which is the least unreasonable of any of the alternatives he can choose to end his term of deployment, or as Cady suggested to register his moral repugnance regarding certain illegal orders. Yet given the nature of the socialization process involved in military training, the incentive for becoming more autonomous in the combatant role is reduced by the directives to obey authority unquestioningly, submit his or her will to that of the commander, take responsibility for saving the lives of all in his unit, etc. Autonomy would be viewed as a moral ideal too costly to develop on the part of the individual, given the stakes for his fellow troops. Secondly, if the soldier was not given the information that would reveal the war’s immorality prior to deployment, this violates an important pre-requisite of autonomy, i.e., having full information about the action one is considering.

We can surmise that from French’s point of view, the organizations (e.g., U.S. Army or Marines) have constructed a role whose successful enactment requires a stifling of a soldier’s capacity for autonomy. But then it’s unclear what this entails as far as either:

1. the morality of the role itself, (one that requires denial, self-deception, or minimally stifling one’s capacity for autonomy understood as the capacity for critical self-reflexivity; or

2. the blameworthiness of the relatively non-autonomous soldier who acts in a mental state of limited autonomy. This needs to be further analyzed in terms of the morality of role-acceptance, which is a significant distinction in French’s
earlier work. Once one accepts a morally flawed or illegitimate role, there arises a very weighty role responsibility to save the lives of other members of one’s unit in extreme adverse circumstances. This is so even if its acceptance is the result of significantly limited opportunities for autonomy.

One of the ironies that combatants are made aware of with regard to role confusion is that despite the training they’ve been given to transcend their individuality and instead, to unite one’s fate and destiny with that of unit, their status and standing subsequent to service is reduced to isolated random individuals. Schram argues that an individual proving that a situation experienced during war was the cause of his health effects is extremely unlikely, given that he would need to “do battle with legions of government lawyers, doctors, scientists and bureaucrats.” (FN 25 Schram) So although they may have been originally motivated to join the military for altruistic reasons (e.g., because their country needed them after the attack on the World Trade Center), and despite the fact that they did experience a transcendent uniting of body and soul with comrades during the war, once their term of service is completed, the government reinforces their pre-war standing as self-defined individuals.

Section 3. The Morality of the combatant role construction and acceptance.

Is there a moral difference between accepting of the role of combatant in order to fight an unjust vs. a just war? Most enlisted soldiers believe that if they’re deployed to combat duty, they’re fulfilling a moral duty to protect their country, and leave it up to the Pentagon and the chief executive to determine which battles are morally worth fighting. It's only later when thrust into the chaos, confusion, trauma, and illegality of battle that the questions of whether the war is justified, or whether the mission they’re engaged in is justified, typically arise. We can compare the excuse of mistake as it functions in these cases, with the possible self-deception one might engage in when involved in a much more blatantly unjustified organization: assassins working for drug cartels, the American or Italian Mafia, hit men available for personal vendettas
or insurance money, etc. What I’m arguing for here is it’s the ideological function of just warism that enables the self-deception of combatants with regard to the moral status of their own acts of killing.

Life-world assumptions about the inevitability of our country seeking military solutions to other country’s political problems are misguided and serve only to maintain global hegemony, yet at the same time make it very difficult to engage in fruitful communicative action regarding the justification of any specific military engagement. With regard to the U.S. current military operations in Afghanistan (in 2012), it seems obvious to us now that the coalition forces there unjustifiably sacrificed a great many American lives, as well as Afghan civilian lives, for the sake of eliminating Al Qaeda and the Taliban and helping to bring democracy to Afghanistan. Overtures are being made by the Karzai government to include the Taliban in the government. Corruption in the government runs rampant (the Afghanistan defense and interior ministers were recently removed for corruption). Opium production has increased, and warlords are receiving obscene amounts of money from the U.S. for providing protection for traveling through their fiefs. But when these facts are made known to enlisted men and women who are already deployed in combat, their options for registering moral dissent are limited. Defection endangers the rest of the combatants in their platoon and can result in court martialing and further recriminations.

This essay has attempted to document the moral confusion and psychological suffering endured by combatants when they become apprised of the moral issues brought to the fore in combat. Yet, there is another broader, ethical question that worries us as well, and that is our own collective responsibility for sustaining the role of combatant as a worthy ethical choice for our young citizens. Our society is currently deeply divided about what types of actions are required from us collectively regarding the moral dilemmas recent U.S. military operations have placed our armed forces, evidenced by a frequently viewed public message, “Support Our Troops, Bring Them Home. “
As Plato argued in *The Republic*, designing social, productive institutions to accomplish one’s society’s minimal requirements must also make it possible for citizens to carry out their role responsibilities in such a way that promotes their virtue. The soldier/warrior archetype is extolled in that text when it’s carried out virtuously, i.e. with courage, self-discipline, integrity and with a view to fighting worthwhile, risk-beneficial wars. He also claims that censorship is required to produce such states of courage in battle: stories about soldiers “losing it” in battle are prohibited. Ultimately, this proviso can be viewed as a concession to the need for intensive socialization prior to deployment. Yet becoming a combatant in extremely dangerous, traumatizing yet morally or militarily questionable circumstances is not the sole or even the best option for developing these virtues in the warrior in the service of justice. Plato has characterized risk-taking in combat as foolhardy if the war itself isn’t justified. We can surmise then that the devolution of courageous hero to chump for the sake of questionable political goals is a stance with which Plato would concur. A more expansive conception of courage is needed to replace the current masculinist paradigm, i.e., as tied to taking serious risks for the sake of political or military goals. One might wonder why a woman pregnant for the second time isn’t lauded for her courage in facing great suffering and potential serious risk for the sake of birthing her offspring.

In conclusion, the combatant role confusion and conflict described here has one of its jointly sufficient conditions, the social construction of the courageous, altruistic, heroic combatant role that’s radically out of sync with the lived experience of a highly trained mercenary, who can’t break his or her contract with the armed forces without further endangering his fellow combatants or her own fragile morally challenged identity. And as stated above, I’m also arguing for a more extensive, nation-wide Habermasian dialog regarding the lifeworld assumptions about just warism, as well as about alternatives for virtuous national service outside the military paradigm.

FN2, Cady. op. cit, p.78-9

FN 3 Cady, ibid., p. 17


FN 6 Rory Stewart “Lessons from Afghanistan”, New York Review of Books, August, 2012, V. LIX, #3. A refusal to admit even in hindsight that a disastrous military invasion constituted a defeat is certainly not just an American phenomenon, as Stewart points out in his analysis of political justifications of the British invasion of Afghanistan in 1839. Almost all British contemporary accounts “assert that the army could have avoided disaster if it had marched immediately into the city of the (murdered) resident, and crushed the insurgency…. They suggest that the situation could have been saved with a clear strategy, good leadership and enough troops. And they foster the ideas – as the Soviet military did in 1988 – not only that they were not defeated, but that they could have won outright if they had not been let down by bad planning, logistics and tactics, and their having been withdrawn by cowards.” P. 80


FN 8 Cady, ibid, p. 75-76

FN 9 Yet because just war theory requires that the benefits must outweigh the costs, any particular military engagement can only be provisionally justified, given that wars have long-term consequences that are unknowable at the time of the war being declared, e.g., consider the long term consequences of the diasporas of
war-ravaged countries in the 20th century. This position is roughly equivalent to the position Cady defines as epistemological or fallibilistic pacifism. P. 69-70.

FN 10 Martin Shram, Vets Under Siege: How America Deceives and Dishonors Those Who Fight Our Battles – St. Martin’s Press, N.Y. 2008. Schram describes the ordeal of one of many soldiers, Bill Florey. Florey developed serious illnesses, including cancer, due to their exposure to the nerve gas sarin during a demolition operation in Khamisiyah in March 1991, where Iraqi chemical weapons were stored. The response of the physician at the Dallas VA hospital to his cancer was “Therefore, it is my opinion that IT IS LESS LIKELY THAN NOT that his co-
epidermoid carcinoma of the parotid gland is related to his military service, particularly to environmental hazards during Gulf War Service.” P. 34 The VA, Schramp points out, put the burden of proof on Florey, even though they alone possessed the data that should have been used to determine whether there was evidence that would support or refute Florey’s benefits claim. One common response to veteran’s requests for medical treatment for their service related diseases and disabilities is to continually mistakes until the vet dies, is disqualified for benefits and or just gives up out of frustration and demoralization. Examples too numerous to cite attest to the U.S. government’s treatment of ill and disabled veterans as persons without inherent worth or dignity.


FN 14 Evan Wright, Generation Kill: Devil Dogs, Iceman, Captain America and the New Face of American War, Berkeley Publishing Group. 2004 Wright describes the confusion and cynicism of the Marines First Recon unit who were ordered by commanders to carry out clearly illegal, unethical or foolhardy orders: “In their paranoid moments, some Marines believe (their commander) Lt. Col. Stephen
Ferrando is trying to get them killed.” (p. 185.) Sgt. Christopher Wasik, Ferrando’s driver, hypothesized “it may be a possibility that the commander (Ferrando) wants some of us to die, so when he sits around with other high leaders, they don’t snicker at him and ask what kind of shit he got into.” P. 186.

FN 15 Wright, ibid. Wright describes the moral and emotional agony of a Marine (Sgt. Charles Graves) who was involved in retrieving the body of a dead very young girl (approximately 3 years old) whose father had mistakenly driven through a checkpoint, as having had a sense of elation regarding previous deaths caused by fellow Marines during the 2003 invasion: “I felt good about it, like, Yeah’ Marines have been fucking shit up... I cruised into this war thinking my buddy’s going to take a bullet, and I’m going to be the fucking hero pulling him out of harm’s way. Instead, I end up pulling out this little girl we shot, hiding in the back seat of her dad’s car.” P. 219.

FN 16 Wright, ibid. Although there are similarities among the motivations of those who enlist in the various branches of the military, the unique mindset that seems to characterize the Marines is illustrated in the following discussion by Sergeant Rudy Reyes, of the First Recon Battalion of the marines, who go through much of the same training as the Navy SEAL’s and Army Special Forces, “I joined the Marines for idealism and romance. Idealism because it’s so hard. The Marine Corps is a wonderful tool of self-enlightenment. Discipline erases all preconceived notions, and the pain becomes a medium of self-discovery. The romance comes in because we are a small band of hard motherfuckers, trained to go behind enemy lines against forces twenty or forty times bigger than us. And brother if that ain’t romantic, I don’t know what is.” P. 26. This theme of testing oneself to discover how tough one can be in the worst of circumstances is a common one among Marines in the Recon unit. Sgt. Brad Colbert, the top team leader of that same unit, described his own attitude towards his role in the Recon unit: “I’m not idealistic that I subscribe to good versus evil. We haven’t had a war like that since WWII (with reference to the impending invasion to remove Saddam Hussein) We’re going into the great unknown. Scary, isn’t it? I can’t wait.” P. 31
FN 17 Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, University of Chicago, Chicago, 2003. In response to a question regarding his ideas on heroism posed by interviewer Borradori, Habermas argued, “The courage, discipline and selflessness demonstrated by the N.Y. firemen who on September 11 spontaneously put their lives on the line to save others is admirable. But why do they need to be called “heroes”? ... It seems to me whenever “heroes” are honored the question arises as to who needs them and why. Even in this looser sense of the term one can understand Bertolt Brecht’s warning, “Pity the land that needs heroes.” p. 43.

FN 18 Wright, ibid. Wright describes the confusion of one of the Marines involved in the 2003 invasion of Iraq when he realizes that his platoon is also fighting Syrian jihadists, who are engaged in a holy war to eliminate non-Muslims from the Arabian peninsula, rather than solely fighting Saddam’s own army in the attempt to remove him from power. “Nevertheless (Lieutenant Nathaniel) Fick is grim. While Fick has never been avidly pro-war, he’d always radiated quiet confidence about the Americans – at least the Marines – reaching their basic objective: regime change. The arrival of Syrians had shaken him. ‘Isn’t this the absolute opposite of what we wanted to have happened here?’ he asks.” P. 250. Role confusion is also evidenced in the following response to shooting unarmed civilians as required by Marines’ roadblock rules regarding cars that don’t stop at roadblocks: “When I talk to Saucier about this shooting later, he says he never in his life imagined he would be called on to fire on unarmed people. ‘Words can’t describe how I feel about it. When we came over here, I expected we would do what you read in history books. We would go through the desert and fight armies. But all we’re seeing is random tactics, guys shooting at us with civilians everywhere, which makes sense from their point of view. Their guerrilla tactics don’t make me feel better about or justify the civilian deaths we’re causing, but these Marines are my brothers. I’ll do anything to defend them. All I try to do is put this bad stuff out of my mind.” P. 255. The comment about conceptualizing the combatant role in light of historical precedent bears mentioning, given that many enlisted men are motivated to join the armed forces in order to play a role in world history, understood as paradigmatically military history; and secondly, it
makes one wonder about the veracity of the accounts historians have provided us with, they haven’t included an examination of combatant role confusion, demoralization and trauma.

FN 19 Wright, op.cit. Although enlistees prior to serving in combat are often motivated to join because of the need others have in their communities to enjoy the freedom and security so many Americans enjoy, which is viewed as requiring the heroic self-sacrifice of others, Wright provides an account in the epilogue of how these sacrifices are not necessarily perceived as heroic by the vets themselves. Sgt. Antonio Espera responded to the celebration of his heroism at a party in Malibu as follows: “I’m not a hero. Guys like me are just a necessary part of things. To maintain this way of life in a fine community like this, you need psychos like us to go out and drop a bomb on somebody’s house.” P. 353.


FN 21 Gray

FN 22 Gray

FN 23 Gray

FN 24 Schram, op.cit, p. 35.

FN 25 Peter French, “Inference Gaps in Moral Assessment,” from War and Moral Dissonance, Cambridge University Press, 2011. This is explained on French’s part by the fact that “the elements of the moral world, although related, are distinct and require separate moral attention when it comes to moral assessment.” P. 211. By elements, he’s referring to institutions, organizations, actors, actors’ actions, etc. A premise about the moral evaluation of one element doesn’t entail a similar positive or negative assessment of another element.