U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Public Access Author manuscript

Perspect Psychol Sci. Author manuscript; available in PMC 2021 November 04.

Published in final edited form as:

Perspect Psychol Sci. 2021 November ; 16(6): 1456–1460. doi:10.1177/1745691621991881.

Judgments of Morality in War: Commentary on Watkins (2020)

Sheila B. Frankfurt,

VISN 17 Center of Excellence for Research on Returning War Veterans, Waco, TX; Central Texas Veterans Healthcare System, Temple, TX; College of Medicine, Texas A&M University, Bryan, TX

Alanna Coady

University of British Columbia – Okanagan

Watkins (2020) proposed an ambitious research program that aims to produce a descriptive map of the norms that govern behavior during war by studying layperson's judgments of right and wrong. Supposedly, laypeople's moral judgments of conduct in war inform public policy and the laws of war (Watkins, 2020; p. 3, 14) and can help determine how to hold people accountable for their actions in war (p.14). To carry out this program, Watkins (2020) recommends researchers do three things: 1) base research questions on the Just War Theory (JWT) framework (Walzer, 2015); 2) treat peacetime scenarios and wartime scenarios as distinctly different moral contexts (Watkins, 2020, p. 12); and 3) study the perspective of so-called uninvolved third-party observers (Watkins, 2020, p. 2).

Watkins (2020) offers a thoughtful overview of JWT-related psychological research and interesting directions for future research on this theory. However, as we will attempt to explain, a descriptive map of people's judgments of conduct in war will not succeed if it is tethered to one particular normative theory of war such as JWT. A normative theory details specific standards and values (i.e., norms) and identifies what should and should not be done, in moral terms. JWT, like other normative theories, describes what moral judgments *should* guide war decision-making but not *how* people make moral judgments.

Moral psychological researchers warn that research designs that rely on comparisons to normative standards are problematic for understanding moral judgments (Bartels et al., 2014). This is because there is no consensus about which normative theory provides the "right" answer or guidance on what the correct action in a scenario would be. In other words, there is no solid rational or empirical basis for selecting a normative theory as the primary basis of comparison.

We agree that studying war can enrich our understanding of morality and moral judgments. Thus, we offer what we hope are constructive comments on psychological research on the morality of war.

Contextual Differences between War and Peace

Watkins' (2020) proposes that researchers assume that war and peace are different moral contexts governed by distinct sets of moral rules. She suggests that judgments between war and peace differ due to different operative moral rules for each context (i.e., the morality of war, as Watkins defines it). Watkins' (2020) point that people may judge war differently is well taken. Yet, the distinct context approach she suggests may limit, rather than enhance, the goal of understanding moral judgments of war.

Moral psychology suggests that people do not make everyday moral judgments consistently nor based on any one normative system (Bartels et al., 2014). It does not follow that people would make judgments consistently enough in war to produce a reliable map of moral rules. People exhibit moral flexibility depending on small contextual shifts that may not necessarily fall along the purported boundaries of war and peacetime scenarios (Bartels et al., 2014).

We suggest that it may not be a discoverable set of norms that distinguishes war from peace, but shifting social factors that guide moral judgments. People make moral judgments based on principles (such as Care and Loyalty; e.g., Graham et al., 2013; Haidt & Joseph, 2007) and contextual factors (e.g., one's social role or relationship with other people; see Rai & Fiske, 2011) that may cut across situation and context (Bartels et al., 2014; Iliev, Sachdeva, & Medin, 2012; Waldmann & Dieterich, 2007). Differences in judgments between war and peace scenarios may be due to differences in the relative salience, prominence, or prioritization of these factors, rather than because war and peace are ruled by comprehensively different moral systems.

Watkins (2020) argues that war and peace contexts must be mapped separately before they can be compared (p.12), but this presumes, *a priori*, that these contexts are separate. Peacetime is treated as a monolithic moral universe which consistently proscribes harm, but there are non-war scenarios in which harm would be expected, such as boxing matches. Variations in moral judgments should be examined in contexts where harm would be expected, both in war and in civilian contexts. The separability of war and nonwar should be empirically examined by comparing moral scenarios (e.g., scenarios involving expectations of harm) that may have similar contextual and social features across these different settings.

Chimera of influential, uninvolved third-party observers

The layperson perspective is invoked because third-party, uninvolved individuals' opinions can supposedly influence military and political policy (Watkins, 2020; p10). We question whether that is actually the case. The category of uninvolved third-party observers as imagined for this project is ambiguous and cannot be identified in practical terms.

Third-party observers are "laypeople who are not from the same country or group as any of the soldiers involved" (Watkins, 2020, p.1). Necessarily, no citizen of a country at war is uninvolved using Watkins' and Just War Theory standards. For example, in 2014, U.S. citizens were involved in as few as one war (the Global War on Terror) and as many as 134 (the number of countries in which U.S. armed forces were acting) (McGrath, 2014).

The Council on Foreign Relations currently estimates at least 25 armed conflicts occurring around the globe and involving many countries, either directly or indirectly. Thus, few citizens meet this definition.

The importance of these layperson judgments is that they supposedly shape policy regarding violations of wartime rules and norms (Watkins, 2020, p.10). However, Watkins provided descriptions of involved civilians influencing policy through voting, protesting, and lobbying (i.e., Holsti, 2000; Keck & Sikkink, 1999). In the context of laypeople shaping policy, it remains unclear who would qualify as both uninvolved and influential.

The nominally uninvolved actually have varying and graduated degrees of involvement in war. Individuals can have multidimensional connections to war, for instance, through family relations, personal commitments, employment in civil or defense-related industries, or civil activism. Involvement can vary across the lifespan and lifespace; a veteran has a different level of involvement than both an active-duty service member and a civilian. A distant relationship to war does not equal noninvolvement and may actually be the norm in a society enmeshed in wars abroad, such as the U.S. Thus, varying degrees of involvement need to be factored into the map of people's moral judgments.

Maybe the goal is to focus solely on the judgments of those who have never actively or directly participated in war (see Watkins, 2020, p. 13). If so, there is no reason to think their perspectives would produce a descriptive map of a clear system of norms that govern war. Such judgments are contextually and temporally bound (e.g., Rai & Fiske, 2011; Bartels et al., 2014), subject to personal, cultural, and political influences and biases (Graham et al., 2011), and are naive to the complex and contradictory pressures operative within war. As Lazar (2017) writes, "We should be proportionately less confident of our intuitions the more removed the test case is from our lived experience." The proposed program of research risks missing morally relevant details, such as the influence of life-threat and hierarchy on behaviors and decisions, that must be gathered through an understanding of the lived experience of wartime situations.

Third party judgments will likely neglect how some combatants report distress over their actions (or inactions), even when those actions accord with JWT and the rules of war (Litz et al., 2009). They may offer a counter-narrative to core JWT principles of discrimination and proportionality (i.e., that killing other combatants is moral). We present the idea of moral injury to show how personal experiences of war are a vital yet omitted resource for achieving the goals of Watkins research.

Combat-Related Moral Injury

Some combatants seem to develop moral injury after participating in war (Frankfurt & Frazier, 2016). Moral injury describes the impairing and disturbing guilt, shame, rage and psychiatric problems that can result from actions taken or witnessed that violate deeply held norms and values (Litz et al., 2009). The most flagrant potentially morally injurious acts are those that violate the rules of engagement such as excessive violence or atrocities. However, moral injury may develop following legal or permissible acts of war (Currier, McCormick,

& Drescher, 2015). For instance, some U.S. Veterans who report killing combatants in war report worse mental health outcomes, such as worse PTSD and depression, as well as debilitating guilt and shame (see Frankfurt & Frazier, 2016 for review; Maguen et al., 2009).

The idea of moral injury suggests that combatants could follow the JWT principle of discrimination (by only killing or harming enemy combatants) and still report grave moral distress. This suggests that JWT principles may not track with how combatants describe their moral judgments of their own actions. Unfortunately, the proposed research program will have trouble accommodating how moral distress could result from actions condoned by JWT. JWT rules out that proportional and discriminate killing or harming of combatants could be immoral. Further, it implies that moral distress in response to actions condoned by JWT is irrational or unjustified.

The research program suggested by Watkins (2020) asks participants to contemplate hypothetical scenarios from an experientially distanced third-person perspective, and, as far as we can tell, not to intuit from a first-person perspective about how it would feel to carry out these actions. We suspect that research participants may not imagine that combatants could feel intense guilt and shame (i.e., indications of moral wrongness) in response to JWT-congruent actions. For instance, one author (S.F.) has worked with veterans who intellectually see how their actions (including lawful killing in war) could be justified but are psychologically corroded by guilt and shame over the harm their actions caused another person; that is, they judge their actions as wrong and immoral.

Notably, not everyone seems to develop moral injury after potentially morally injurious combat experiences. This raises the interesting question about what individual differences may explain why some people experience killing combatants as morally distressing and others do not. Research that examines the morality of war from the lens of social and contextual factors can investigate individual differences in moral judgments. For instance, perhaps differences in the centrality or acceptance of the role of a combatant, or differences in the relative prioritization of care and non-harm versus other relevant principles such as duty or obedience, accounts for variance in moral judgments.

Research based on the JWT cannot investigate these individual differences. At best, such research can tell us whether moral judgments do or do not follow the principles of JWT but not how or why such judgments are made. The proposed program would not capture the responses of those who participated in war, which seem to be an essential source of information for the goal of understanding morality in war.

Political Implications of Descriptive Mapping

War is the continuation of politics with other means (Clausewitz, Howard, Paret, & Brodie, 1984). We suspect that a project to map the morality of war is politics with other means as well, whether intended as such or not. We wish to voice our concerns about the political and ideological implications of basing the study of the morality of war on solely JWT.

Our initial question was, why use JWT as the sole theory on which to base a study of the morality of war? Watkins (2020) recommends JWT in part because it is supposedly

“an external and potentially impartial view [...] of the conduct of war” (p.3). This picture obscures the foundation of modern JWT. From its inception, JWT was intended to provide moral cover for war. The roots of modern JWT are found in early and medieval Christian writing, from Augustine of Hippo to Thomas Aquinas. Early Christian theologians faced a difficult task of reconciling the religious tenets of nonparticipation in secular political life and nonviolence with the imperial ambitions of a new Christian state (Cox et al., 2015). For instance, the JWT tenet that war is a distinct context with a unique set of moral rules served to justify violence within the bounds of wartime contexts by distancing war from the Christian values of nonviolence that governed daily life.

JWT ought to be understood as one of three dominant modern theories of the morality of war, alongside pacifism and political realism (Lazar, 2015). JWT is a set of principles that, if met, purportedly define morally acceptable reasons for war (*jus ad bello*) and morally acceptable actions in war (*jus ad bello*) (Lazar, 2020). Pacifism is the principled commitment to peace and rejection of war; it encompasses a family of beliefs that range from constrained anti-war beliefs to absolute rejection of any forms of violence (Fiala, 2018). Political realism is the view that international relations are marked by competition, including warfare, and that pragmatic considerations, not moral considerations, should dominate decision-making (Korab-Karpowicz, 2018). Of note, political realism has guided U.S. foreign policy, including the Cold War, for most of the 20thc. (Wivel, 2017). Watkins (2020) offers no strong rationale or justification for selecting JWT over other possible theories of morality of war, and such an approach presumes that this is the best theory when that is actually undeterminable.

Using JWT principles to “discover” the “proscriptive and prescriptive norms that guide the behavior of individual actors, and the judgments of uninvolved third-party observers, during war” (Watkins, 2020, p.2) will result in circular reasoning. JWT already defines what Watkins’ (2020) is setting out to discover. Thus, Watkins’ (2020) approach naturalizes JWT as the morality of war by selecting it as the compass with which to map the morality of war.

Although modern JWT claims impartiality, it is a politically motivated position that furthers a particular agenda, one that is now enshrined in international law via, for instance, the United Nations Charter and the Geneva Convention. In practical terms, results from a research program mapping the morality of war in JWT terms will likely be used to support the U.S.- and Western-dominated approach to global affairs.

There are distinct ideological outcomes if psychology aligns with this research program (because the principles of JWT have political allegiance), just as other moral positions (e.g., pacifism) have political implications. Given that the practice of war (even under JWT conditions) may violate the APA’s Code of Ethics (American Psychological Association, 2017) and other professional ethical codes, the role of academic psychology in supporting particular war-related agendas needs public and robust debate.

Discussion

We agree with Watkins that how war elicits different moral judgments should be explored, but we suggest that the outcome of this project should not be oriented toward producing a distinct and coherent set of rules, like JWT, for war. Instead, research could examine intersections of different principles and social roles (and other contextual factors) in relevant or instructive wartime scenarios. Rather than understanding war as a distinct context with its own “set of prescriptive and proscriptive norms,” as Watkins (2020) intends to uncover (p. 2), we suggest that studies should be framed with an understanding of war as involving particular *social* contexts, that may share features with non-war contexts.

The proposed research program cannot establish a comprehensive map of public moral judgments of war or the nature of morality in war, because the nature of morality in war is already presupposed by the JWT framework adopted to explore it. Instead, the field of psychology will end up supporting a particular ideology with real world implications and commitments. How a person judges wartime situations, whether as moral, immoral, or amoral, is a complex question, and a single person’s answer could change based on the particulars in a given situation.

A research program on the morality of war claiming real-world outcomes for “knowing how best to hold individuals responsible for their actions in war” (Watkins, 2020, p.14) ought to consider the perspectives of those individuals who have been in war, both former combatants and noncombatants, and who have made real-life wartime moral decisions. A map of the morality of war without these perspectives is incomplete and therefore insufficient for policy making. A map of the morality of war that does not include combatant and noncombatant perspectives may, even unintentionally, support militarism by minimizing the moral and practical injuries these people suffer.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Central Texas Veterans Healthcare System, the VISN 17 Center of Excellence, and a Career Development Award – 1 (IK1RX002427-01A2) to Dr. Frankfurt from the Rehabilitation Research and Development Service of the VA Office of Research and Development. The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of VA or our academic affiliates. We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

References

- American Psychological Association. (2017). Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct. Washington, DC: Author.
- Bartels DM, Bauman C, Cushman F, Pizarro D, and McGraw AP (2014), “Moral Judgment and Decision Making,” In Keren G & Wu G (Eds.) Blackwell Reader of Judgment and Decision Making. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Clausewitz C, Howard M, Paret P, & Brodie B (1984). On War. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Cox R (2015). The ethics of war up to Thomas Aquinas. In Frowe H & Lazar S (eds), Oxford Handbook of Ethics of War. New York, Oxford University Press. Doi: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199943418.013.19

- Currier JM, McCormick W, & Drescher KD (2015). How do morally injurious events occur? A qualitative analysis of perspectives of veterans with PTSD. *Traumatology*, 21(2), 106–116. 10.1037/trm0000027
- Fiala A (2018). Pacifism. In Zalta EN (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/pacifism/>
- Frankfurt S, & Frazier P (2016). A review of research on moral injury in combat veterans. *Military Psychology*, 28(5), 318–330.
- Graham J, Haidt J, Koleva S, Motyl M, Iyer R, Wojcik S, & Ditto PH (2013). Moral foundations theory: The pragmatic validity of moral pluralism. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 47, 55–130. Doi: 10.1016/B978-0-12-407236-7.00002-4
- Graham J, Nosek B, Haidt J, Iyer R, Koleva S, & Ditto P (2011). Mapping the moral domain. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101(2), 366. Doi: 10.1037/a0021847 [PubMed: 21244182]
- Haidt J, & Joseph C (2007). The moral mind: How 5 sets of innate intuitions guide the development of many culture-specific virtues, and perhaps even modules. In Carruthers P, Laurence S & Stich S (Eds.), *The Innate Mind*, Vol. 3 (pp. 367–391). New York: Oxford.
- Holsti OR (2004). *Public opinion and American foreign policy* (Rev. ed.). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Iliev R, Sachdeva S, & Medin DL (2012). Moral kinematics: The role of physical factors in moral judgments. *Memory & Cognition*, 40, 1387–1401. Doi:10.3758/s13421-012-0217-1 [PubMed: 22618711]
- Keck ME, & Sikkink K (1999). Transnational advocacy networks in international and regional politics. *International Social Science Journal*, 51(159), 89–101.
- Korab-Karpowicz W. Julian, "Political Realism in International Relations", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Zalta Edward N. (ed.), Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/realism-intl-relations/>
- Lazar S (2017). Just war theory: Revisionists versus traditionalists. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 20, 37–54. Doi: 10.1146/annurev-polisci-060314-112706
- Lazar S (2020). War. In Zalta EN (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Spring 2020 ed.). Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/war/>
- Litz B, Stein N, Delaney E, Lebowitz L, Nash W, Silva C, & Maguen S (2009). Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans: A preliminary model and intervention strategy. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 29(8), 695–706. [PubMed: 19683376]
- Maguen S, Metzler TJ, Litz BT, Seal KH, Knight SJ, & Marmar CR (2009). The impact of killing in war on mental health symptoms and related functioning. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 22(5): 435–43. doi: 10.1002/jts.20451 [PubMed: 19842160]
- McGrath T (2014, 1). The U.S. is either involved in 134 wars or none, depending on your definition of 'war'. *The World*, Public Radio International. Retrieved from: <https://www.pri.org/stories/2014-09-16/us-now-involved-134-wars-or-none-depending-your-definition-war>
- Rai TS, & Fiske AP (2011). Moral psychology is relationship regulation: Moral motives for unity, hierarchy, equality, and proportionality. *Psychological Review*, 118, 57–75. Doi: 10.1037/a0021867 [PubMed: 21244187]
- Waldmann MR, & Dieterich JH (2007). Throwing a bomb on a person versus throwing a person on a bomb intervention myopia in moral intuitions. *Psychological Science*, 18(3), 247–253. Doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9280.2007.01884.x [PubMed: 17444922]
- Walzer M (2015). *Just and unjust wars: A moral argument with historical illustrations* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Watkins HM (2020). The morality of war: A review and research agenda. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 15(2), 231–249. Doi: 10.1177/1745691619885872 [PubMed: 32004108]
- Watkins HM, & Goodwin G (2019). A fundamental asymmetry in judgments of soldiers at war. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*. Advance online publication. doi:10.31219/osf.io/m7kvc
- Wivel A (2017). Realism in foreign policy analysis. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia, Politics* (oxfordre.com/politics). 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.475