Arguing about War

by Michael Walzer, Yale University Press, 2004, 224 pp.

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While others in his field feel the lure of lofty abstraction, Michael Walzer is a political philosopher who has made a point of working from the 'ground up.' The ground in question has shifted and expanded, his writings ranging across issues from the nature of equality to the history of Jewish political thinking. His 1984 book *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* put him in the major league of contemporary English-speaking political theorists, coming somewhere shortly after Rawls, Nozick and MacIntyre. Before that, in 1978, came *Just and Unjust Wars* – a book which has come to be required reading for students and teachers of the ethics of war, in respect both of its conduct (*jus in bello*) and the circumstances in which it is justified (*jus ad bellum*). The Latinate stock phrases reflect the (unsurprisingly) long vintage of such debates, within and beyond the Western philosophical tradition. In the latter, formal discussion of what counts as a 'just war' had its tone set by mediaeval Catholic theology. Walzer's book has been widely recognised as a definitive modern mapping of the issues. It was accessible, provocative and formidable – and whether one was convinced or not, a model of philosophical non-flatulence. Presenting simple pacifism and amoral realism as untenable alternatives, it developed, through case-study and extended argument, a rubric to distinguish good from bad reasons for waging war. Walzer aimed to bolster two main conclusions, re-stated in this new collection of writings on similar themes: 'that war is sometimes justifiable and that the conduct of war is always subject to moral criticism' (p. ix.)

The conclusions may sound modest – especially so, in a climate in which the idea that war might be somehow *beyond* the reach of moral criticism has come to seem rather gauche. Reagan, Thatcher, Bushes Snr. and Jnr., Blair, and increasingly, the military spokespeople operating on their behalf have all presented their justifications of UK and US foreign policy in overtly moralised terms. Even Donald Rumsfeld goes in for ethics talk these days, or at least looks as if he feels he ought to. This isn't Walzer's doing, of course – and the mere presence of ethics talk provides no warranty for its coherence or sincerity. It may mean the reverse; if its stock is otherwise high, 'just war' rhetoric will be an expedient resource for those in power. But with hindsight, the themes of Walzer's work were a kind of trailer for recent shifts in the register

in which discussion of the ethics of war has taken shape. Amid the ideology and *realpolitik* behind recent events, we are more and more invited to think, there are real ethical arguments – for example, on the notion of 'humanitarian intervention' – to analyse and deconstruct. Those arguments have become part of the furniture of media coverage, and so of the way in which acts of aggression, both wars and terrorism, are experienced by the wider world.

Walzer, for one, sees this as a real sea-change, and a healthy one: a 'triumph' for just war theory (p. 11.) In any case, it has changed the terrain from which the more recent discussions collected here proceed. As I say, starting from those ground-level coordinates is for Walzer a matter of policy. 'One way to begin the philosophical enterprise,' he says near the start of *Spheres of Justice*, 'is to walk out of the cave, leave the city, climb the mountain, fashion for oneself... an objective and universal standpoint.' Walzer has a different plan: 'to stand in the cave, in the city, on the ground.' [1] We may, to be sure, need a broader perspective on the landscape of a problem to a tighter grip on it. But from Walzer's angle this should serve to keep us closer to the ground, rather than winching us away from it. As he says in a recent interview, 'when philosophers write about public affairs, I believe that they must attend to the political and moral realities of the world whose affairs these are.' [2] This has clear appeal, and might seem tricky to rebut. Yet Walzer's method may sometimes cause his arguments trouble. His new book highlights both its strengths and weaknesses.

Arguing about War is a collection of lectures, journalism and articles written largely for non-academic audiences – going back 25 years, and culminating in reflections on the recent Iraq war. It is organised in terms partly of themes – just war theory itself, nuclear deterrence, terrorism – and of testing cases: Kosovo, Afghanistan, Israel/Palestine, and the first Gulf War. Recent history, says Walzer, has softened up his stance. He has 'slowly become more willing to call for military intervention' (dust jacket blurb.) In adjusting his positions, he raises unsettling questions. For example, he extends his own earlier reflections on situations of 'supreme emergency,' arising 'when our deepest values and our collective survival are in imminent danger' (p. 33.) While 'there are no moments in human history that are not governed by moral rules' (p. 34), he argues, there are cases of extremity (the threats posed by Nazism for example) where emergency ethics makes 'great immoralities morally possible' (p. 50.) The yardstick here is couched in terms of 'community.' 'When our community is threatened, not just in its present territorial extension or governmental structure or prestige or honour, but in what we might think of as its

ongoingness, then we face a loss that is greater than any we can imagine, except for the destruction of humanity itself' (p. 43; emphasis in the original.) It's then that the usual rules can be *overridden*; otherwise indefensible acts become defensible. There are constraints on this, of course: the threat to which one responds must be 'a far greater immorality'; the response must come 'only at the moment when this threat is near success,' and is justified 'only insofar as the immoral response is the only way of holding off that success' (p. 50.) The rules may be overridden, but not suspended altogether. But nonetheless: at such specific points, certain actions – the carpet-bombing of residential areas in German cities in the early 1940s is Walzer's own example – become candidates for justifiability.

His underlying point – that one needn't be a bone-headed utilitarian to think that some situations demand that our normal moral limits be temporarily extended – may be a fair one. Concerns, though, surround the terms in which this point is made. 'Our community' is itself, of course, a morally flexible notion; what constitutes a community, and what counts as a 'threat' to it, will be differently construed. Are the recently-moved settlers on the Gaza strip such a community? It seems plausible to think so, on Walzer's as on most other definitions – and certainly going by the views of the settlers themselves. If so, is the threat of eviction – from their own government, indeed – something which threatens that community's 'ongoingness?' Would this justify turning their protests from non-violent ones to acts of aggression beyond the limits of conventional moral acceptability? Or otherwise, more generally: at what point in the threat to a given community might torture become identifiable as the appropriate 'immoral response?' What new limits, if any, come into play when it's time to 'override' the customary ones? To wonder thus does not by itself refute Walzer's case. But having opened up this space, he fails to insure himself against (mis)appropriation by those for whom his arguments function as a most convenient self-apologia. No distinguishing criteria are offered, either for the degree by which normal moral limits might be overstepped, or the motives by which this might rightfully be done. Here as elsewhere, Walzer's approach sheds light in some places, but seems to obfuscate in others. The trouble, I guess, is that simply appealing to 'the realities of the world' does not, by itself, demonstrate that they are this way rather than that.

This problem occurs also when Walzer discusses the situation in Iraq. Those of us who opposed the war but support the construction of a democratic, flourishing post-war Iraq come up against a familiar kind of rebuff (delivered with or without a scoffing snort.) It goes something like this: 'If you opposed the war which *enabled*

the construction of a better Iraq, you're now hitching a ride on the very process you objected to.' Which, so it's said, makes one the rankest sort of hypocrite. Except that it doesn't, of course. The retort is question-begging. It assumes that the war, because it happened, was the only way to bring about a better, Saddam-free, violence-free Iraq. It assumes, too, that this particular kind of territory – invaded and occupied – is now the best foundation on which to build that alternative society. And these claims, precisely, are what were doubted by the anti-war case. That case had two main elements: a questioning of the motives and rationales for US and UK military intervention, and a questioning of whether – in any case – war was the only or best way to bring about a better Iraq. On both points, Walzer backs the anti-war position. 'America's war is unjust,' he writes in a piece dated just as it was starting, in March 2003. 'Though disarming Iraq is a legitimate goal, morally and politically, it is a goal that we could almost certainly have achieved with measures short of full-scale war' (p. 160.) But then he moves, importantly, to an issue that since he wrote has become all the more pressing. Is it 'possible... to fight an unjust war and then produce a decent post-war political order?' (p. 163.)

'Possible' is ambiguous here, and could be taken in either a descriptive or a normative sense: respectively, 'Can such an order be forged?' or 'Would it be morally justifiable to do so?' Let's assume, as Walzer seems to, that it means the latter. The position described above – anti-war but pro-reconstruction – seems clearly to depend on some degree of a 'yes' in response to this question. What a 'yes' rejects is the alternative position – anti-war and anti-reconstruction – adopted, or apparently so, in much of the rhetoric of the Stop the War campaigns. This rejection seems to me entirely justified, indeed vital: a just post-war settlement seems, if anything, to be all the more urgently required in cases where the war itself has not been justified. Walzer argues that 'we need criteria for jus post bellum [justice after war] that are distinct from (though not wholly independent of) those that we use to judge the war and its conduct' (p. 163.) But this does not, by itself, deliver an answer to how Iraq is to be reconstructed: whether by continued US presence, or otherwise. And here, Walzer takes a turn which, I think, creates tensions in his own position. 'Having fought the war,' he argues, 'we are now responsible for the well-being of the Iraqi people; we have to provide the resources – soldiers and dollars – necessary to guarantee their security and begin the political and economic reconstruction of their country' (p. 164.)

Much depends here on what we mean by resources, and how they are provided. There is a line between support, on the one hand, and imperialism or profiteering on

the other. It's a line which Walzer himself seems to teeter on with some discomfort. Even if they *should* have been, US 'soldiers and dollars' have not, of course, been offered in some neutral way. They are there with a purpose: not simply to allow for reconstruction, but to police that reconstruction, and to ensure that the contracts for the jobs involved go to what Walzer politely calls 'politically connected American companies' (p. 166.) Rightly, he calls this a 'scandal.' But in the end, on practical grounds, he defends US unilateralism as a kind of least bad alternative. (The European Union, he suggests, is not really interested in moderating American behaviour, as opposed to moaning about it, and it will not put its money where its mouth is.) This defence of the *post-bellum* situation seems to me no defence at all, and is good example of how working from the 'ground up' can lead to strange distortions of perspective. Pitched a little differently, indeed, it might have come from the *Rumsfeld Guide to Applied Ethics*. For the dubiousness of US intentions in waging the war seems to make *all the difference* as to whether those same interests should be at the heart of the *post-bellum* reconstructive enterprise. US interests have not changed. What is owed *post-bellum* to Iraq, surely, is the chance to flourish without their operative presence.

Reading the book as a whole – and there's lots more in there than I've had the chance to cover here – I was struck by the gap between the impressiveness of Walzer's analytical eye, and his propensity to fuzzy-up his answers at other levels. He does invaluable work in showing how different positions, and elements of positions, stack up. Here, as elsewhere, he is forensic in his diagnosis of inconsistency and bad faith. But while he himself is clearly not guilty of the latter, he does not escape the clutches of inconsistency and fudge. He's not alone on this; debates about Iraq have been full of this, on both sides. Politics, writes Walzer (p. 112), 'is a muddle for a long time, and the necessary clarity is finally achieved only because of the muddle.' It's a resonant point. But with his own arguments, one is tempted to suggest that things go in the opposite direction. Their admirable, arresting clarity of presentation covers tensions beneath the surface. That may be no bad thing. The depths of the issues broached, and the punchiness and flair with which Walzer broaches them, would make this book an excellent basis for a 10-week evening class on the currency of war ethics – used as a cue for debates, rather than a resolution of them. But at times – as in the case of the Iraq war – one feels as if he is riding more horses than is possible with one backside. Maybe he is torn between the cave and the city; working from the ground up, it may be tricky to keep a foot in both places at once.

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Notes

[1] Walzer 1983, pp. 6-7.

[2] Walzer 2003, p. 7.