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TRAVEL, FRIENDS, AND KILLING

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In early 2015 the British Army Reserves launched a recruitment drive, emphasizing the opportunities that volunteering affords: world travel, professional training, excitement, and comradeship.¹ In this sense it was typical. Military recruitment tends not to mention the possibility of being complicit in murder. But those who are considering a military career know that there is a risk they will be used to fight unjust wars. And killing in unjust wars is arguably little better than murder. How, then, should a morally conscientious individual decide whether to join the armed forces of her state?

First, it obviously depends who you'll be fighting for. Recent years have seen clearly unjust and, at best, dubious wars launched by many of the major military powers (most notably the US and UK in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Russia in South Ossetia and Ukraine). However, even for citizens of those belligerents, the probability that they will be implicated in wrongdoing alone does not settle the matter. Many activities—learning to drive, for example—increase the risk that we will act wrongfully in future; that alone does not render the activity impermissible. We need to know not only the risk of wrongdoing, but also the expectation of good. Whether it is permissible to volunteer depends (at least in part) on whether your expectation of doing good is greater than your expectation of wrongdoing. And of course members of the armed forces do a lot of good. In particular, they provide security to the state they represent, as well as aid to others in need (not only in conflicts).²

Working out these expectations for individuals is incredibly challenging. But here is one helpful approach. Start by asking whether the

institution is justified. This can mean two things. First, is it morally permissible to have these armed forces, compared with having none at all? Second, are our armed forces the morally best that are feasible in the circumstances? Call the first minimal justification, and the second full justification. One necessary condition of both is that the expectation of good done is greater than the expectation of wrongs caused. Whatever our other moral commitments, if our armed forces are expected to do more wrong than good, relative to having no such institutions, then they cannot be minimally justified; if we expect them to do more wrong than good, relative to alternative feasible institutions, then they cannot be fully justified.

How does the justification of an institution relate to the permissibility of taking part in that institution? Institutions are not made up only by the people who fill their roles. They also have an organizational structure, and they persist through time. But obviously the people in those roles are important parts of the institution. Suppose that the armed forces were fully justified. Then surely participation by at least some of their operatives must be permissible. If the expected good achieved by the institution outweighs the expected bad, then since the institution achieves outcomes only through its members, there must be some whose own contributions realize those values. Perhaps some could be responsible for the lion's share of the good, and others responsible for the bulk of the bad, so that participation by the first group is permissible, but not the second group. But this is unlikely. In warfare the good or bad you do is a function of your causal contribution: those likely to do most good—the people doing the actual fighting, for example, or the generals who direct them—are also those likely to do most wrong.

So, if the institution is fully justified, then the participation that the institution needs in order to function should be permissible, at the individual level. And this means that volunteers are permitted to take the risks of wrongdoing that they take when they join up.

What if the armed forces are only minimally justified? There are two possibilities. On the first, we use the same reasoning as for full justification: the institution cannot be minimally justified if its members are not permitted to perform the roles that the institution depends on for its functioning. So, arguing that volunteering is morally impermissible would amount to arguing that the institutions of the armed forces are not minimally justified.

Secondly, perhaps minimally justified armed forces include roles that are necessary for the institution to function, but are impermissible for those who take them up, because their expectation of wrong is greater than their expectation of good. This might be true of frontline soldiers, for example. To have these justified institutions, perhaps these people must take moral risks that one ought not to take. If minimally justified institutions require that some operatives get dirty hands, then everyone who is able to bear these risks should have an equal prospect of bearing them. It follows that we should endorse conscription. But suppose that some among us volunteer to take on that burden. How should we evaluate their decision? Barring wrongful motivations, and if it is genuinely voluntary, we should surely celebrate it as a remarkable display of not only physical, but moral courage. They are putting both their lives and their souls at risk so that others don't have to, to sustain a minimally justified institution from which we all benefit.

If the armed forces are either minimally or fully justified, then, volunteers are either acting permissibly because the expectation of wrongdoing is outweighed by the expectation of good, or they are heroically running a moral risk that some of us have to run, in order to maintain minimally justified institutions.

The real question, then, is not whether individuals are permitted to join the armed forces, but whether the armed forces themselves are at least minimally justified. Or to put it another way: if you want to argue that joining the military is morally impermissible, you must be prepared to conclude that the military should be disbanded.

Notes

1. See <<http://www.army.mod.uk/news/26868.aspx>> Similar themes predominate on the US army recruitment website (which, interestingly, places much more emphasis on patriotic duty), see <<http://www.goarmy.com>>
2. For example, US military helicopters provided vital aid during the 2015 earthquakes in Nepal: <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-15/us-helicopter-wreckage-found-by-nepals-army/6473950>>