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McPherson vs Walzer: A Dialogue on Terrorism

Terrorism, being one of the world’s most controversial subjects today is one often debated and studied by some of the most reputable scholars throughout history. Lionel McPherson and Michael Walzer are two brilliant theorists who have given their perspectives and arguments on the topic of terrorism in its comparison to war. And although both these views are, in my opinion, well founded and brilliant, I find myself to side more with Walzer’s argument rather than McPherson’s.

Michael Walzer wrote the book *Just and Unjust Wars*, where he ponders ideas about terrorism and moral questions surrounding it. In this book he offers arguments based in moral absolutes. Ideas of undoubtful rights and irrefutable wrongs, such as ideas regarding the killing of non-combatant civilians. Walzer believes that the killing of non-combatants in any situation is murder and is a horrific crime. And more so he believes the intentional targeting and killing of non-combatants is distinctly immoral and a terrible crime regardless of reasoning or rationale. Walzer defines this scenario as terrorism but adds that the reason they do this horrific act is to induce pervasive fear in the affected populous. And although in warfare the killing of non-combatants can and is likely to occur. Walzer distinguishes between terrorism and two other kinds of conflict.

Walzer defines three separate forms of conflict; conventional war, revolutions and terrorism. He defines conventional war as wars which are fought only through and against military options. This means that one states armed forces only attack other states military forces and targets. The scope of aggression in these wars is very small so that the non-combatant casualties remains incredibly small. Revolutions require a larger scope of aggression says Walzer. He believes that this scope not only includes military forces and targets, but also political targets. And lastly this leaves terrorism, which does not distinguish against its targets. It kills military, political and non-combatant all alike in order to induce fear. Because all of these types of combat include varying acceptability in its types of targets, it also includes varying amounts of acceptable lethality.

Conventional warfare includes a much higher acceptance of lethality than its other types. Because the scope of aggression is so small, it allows each state to use however much force they deem necessary without the risk of being labeled as murderers. Revolutions have a more restrictive use of force as compared to conventional warfare. Walzer believes that this is because during revolutions the advocates and actors have a larger scope of aggression. They can choose to attack both military targets as well as political, which makes them more susceptible to negative views. And lastly we come to the most controversial of combat tactics; terrorism.

Terrorism has the highest amount of possible scrutiny due to it having the widest scope of targets. Terrorist attack military, political and non-combatant all alike in order to induce fear. Walzer believes that they do this because for a few reasons. He believes that firstly the terrorists realize that they lack the ability to overpower their enemies militarily so they must attack psychologically. And Walzer also believes that terrorists subject non-combatants to force because they believe they share some responsibility to their government’s actions which caused the terrorist’s grievances. This in turns subjects them to a constant view of being labeled as murderers and immoral actors. Walzer believes that actors who fight with such immoral tactics such as terrorists are murderers, monsters and fight an unjust war regardless of their reasoning for doing so. I find myself to conquer with Walzer whole heartedly in this regard.

In life I believe there to be moral absolutes. Actions which when viewed by man to be intrinsically right or wrong. And in my opinion, this is not a social construct, but an instinct which is constructed into human DNA that we feel down to our bones. Though I can’t prove this to be true so I will digress. Lionel McPherson argues about morality along with Walzer, but in my opinion takes the higher moral argument. Which I will later explain why I partially disagree with this.

McPherson agrees with Walzer’s analysis on terrorism that it is an immoral act and a murderous crime. But he also believes that we cannot judge terrorist without first judging the other types of war. McPherson’s biggest argument is that since war can be justified, then so can terrorism. He compares terrorism to conventional warfare because he believes both to use brutal tactics which he deems immoral. And furthermore, statistics tell us that more people die in conventional warfare than in terrorist attacks. Although I understand the sentiment behind this, I disagree with his argument that they are comparable acts.

McPhersons argument that people should critically analyze state actor’s actions when it comes to warfare is a just argument and one I agree with. During war, conventional or otherwise, there is an increased probability of non-combatant casualty. It is the unfortunate nature of the beast. But to say that the means to which these non-combatant deaths occur is all equally flawed is immorally wrong. There is a fundamental difference between conventional warfare and terrorism in its very foundation. In conventional warfare we know that the battles are fought solely in military terms. Meaning that soldiers and state actors only use force against other soldiers and state actors. This is important because it shows a capability of restraint and morals. In war, there is a notion of intent, regardless of what type of warfare you are conducting (that being conventional, revolutionary or terroristic). I use this word intent to describe the targets which each form of warfare purposefully uses force against.

Conventional and revolutionary warfare only target military and sometimes political targets. Whereas terrorist’s main intended targets are civilians. They *intend* to kill innocent men, women and children all because they believe that those civilians are to blame for their grievances. This is why we cannot compare conventional warfare or otherwise to terrorism. When we compare the two we forget that terrorists are murderers and monsters. Terrorism cannot be labeled as a legitimate form of warfare.

In conventional warfare, soldiers and other military actors are restrictive in their actions by a great margin. This is due to many international laws and war doctrines which restrict state actors from using force against non-combatants. These laws and doctrines were made from moral arguments of right and wrong. And terrorists violate these moral laws and doctrines selfishly, and hide from any punishment which follows. Therefore, I disagree with McPherson’s analysis of the dilemma. There is a significant difference between conventional warfare and terrorism. And this difference makes it unethical to compare conventional warfare to terrorism.