

What is Distinctive About English-school Attitudes to War?

Written by Martin Taggart

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Among the many political options available to governments and statesmen (and stateswomen) is the threat or use of force, more precisely the threat or conduct of war. It is thus important at this point to clearly define what a war is. Put simply, a war is an act of aggression between two groups of people (Clausewitz, 1993: 83) or even between two groups of animals (Gat, 2006: 6-10). Throughout human history war has been used as a means to a political ends "[war is the] continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means" (Clausewitz, 1993: 99). What separates human war from animal 'war' is not the ends or goals as one might think, (interspecies killing among animals, in competition for resources and females, is very common (Gat, 2006: 6-10)), but the way in which humans have theorized, institutionalized and developed war in order to make it more efficient (Dandeker, 1994: 118-23). With advances in weaponry came advances in thought. As war evolved, scholars and generals began to think about the causes of war; why it happens, how it should be utilized or, in today's society, how it should be contained or prevented. As early as the sixth century B.C. (for example, *The Art of War* is one of the earliest surviving manuals on warfare, written in China by Sun Tzu during the Spring and Autumn period (Sawyer, 1994: 79-84)) war has been enthusiastically studied.

The English-school, represented by theorists such as Martin Wight and Hedley Bull (whom I shall be addressing), have a particular attitude towards war based on their interpretations of how states should be organized internationally, and on their moral/normative approach to warfare. As war is such a vast topic and one that is ferociously debated, I shall limit my discussion to several aspects distinctive to English-school thought; its definition of 'war' and the function of war in international politics.

Chapter thirteen of Martin Wight's *Power Politics* (1978) presents the reader with a startlingly realist view. It would not be unreasonable to assume that, from this short chapter, that Wight had assumed what many other realist thinkers had assumed; that war was and will continue to be a human inevitability, indeed he states that "[war] is a normal expression of human nature" (Wight, 1991: 207). What makes Wight different, and therefore not truly realist however, is his belief that "particular wars can be avoided" (Wight, 1987: 137). His rejection of realist assumptions about human progress and conflict (Linklater and Suganami, 2006: 155-56) make his theory of war particular to his "via media" between realism and revolutionism (Linklater and Suganami, 2006: 155). Obviously Wight sees war as a political phenomenon, simply from the discussion of war in his book *Power Politics* (Wight, 1978: 136-43). From his discussion of war in *International Theory* the key to his understanding of war is made clear, "[war is a] means of justice when there is no political superior." (Wight, 1991: 207-18). This is an important aspect of his theory that will be discussed later. Being a devout Christian (Dunne, 1998: 47) it would be reasonable to assume that, although he saw war as: "an in-built dynamic of the international system" (Dunne, 1998: 53) his theory of war would have been influenced by his belief. It is apparent from reading his discussion on war in *International Theory* (Wight, 1991: 207-18), and to a lesser extent his discussion in *Power Politics* (Wight, 1978: 136-43) that Christian scholars, for example, St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine (Dunne, 1998: 47) have had an impact on his idea of war. To St. Aquinas and St. Augustine war was not a prohibited tool of government, provided it was 'just' (Aquinas, 2002: 164-67; Augustine, 1967: 62-183; Sigmund, 1994: 226-27; Weithman, 2005: 245-49). Thus the question on the morality of killing was neatly circumvented (Aquinas, 2002: 164-167; Augustine, 1967: 162-183). Indeed it is clear from his statement "particular wars can be avoided" (Wight, 1987: 137) that he has been influenced by this belief; he

What is Distinctive About English-school Attitudes to War?

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states it explicitly: “[war] must be fought by a just means” (Wight, 1991: 217). Wight’s integration of morality into politics (Linklater and Suganami, 2006: 156) makes his theory of war distinctive to the English-school, and distinct from other theories of war, for example; the realist view of power politics and statism, self-help and survival (Dunne and Schmidt, 2006: 162-63) or the liberal internationalist view of war avoidance (Brown, 2005: 20-1). A theory of war based on Christian values and Christian ‘justice’ has its weaknesses, which shall be addressed later when the theory of Hedley Bull has been discussed.

“War is organized violence carried on by political units against each other.” (Bull, 1983: 184). It seems then, that Hedley Bull begins where many other theorists had begun, and thus he holds the common view that war is a political phenomenon. He goes on to say that war can only occur between “political units” (Bull, 1983: 184). Bull’s theory however is very similar to Wight’s, indeed Bull was greatly influenced by Wight’s lectures (Dunne, 1998: 137). His emphasis on justice and morality mirrors that of Wight and it seems that he also favours a more Grotian or solidaritist view of international politics (Dunne, 1998: 154) as well as the notion of a “common good” (Dunne, 1998: 150-151). His influence of Grotius has thus developed his own theory of war, albeit not dissimilar from Wight’s. Although he does not claim any inspiration from Christianity, he has been influenced by it indirectly via Grotius and Wight. The idea of a society of states leads him to conclude that war should be regulated by “norms or rules, whether legal or otherwise” (Bull, 1983: 184), Grotius calls this the “law of nations”: “[war] should be carried on only within the bounds of law and good faith.” (Grotius, 1987: 550). Wight and Bull’s theories offer some scope for debate.

Both theorists have several elements in common: the emphasis on morality and justice and the primacy of international law or custom “norms or rules” (Bull, 1983: p184). They are very correct in saying that war is a characteristic of human nature. Indeed warfare has been conducted for millennia (Gat, 2006: 11-17). Despite this, a theory of war based on a foundation of justice and morality seems paradoxical, especially in war where the act of killing itself would be seen as immoral or unjust. Should the question: ‘is war just?’ even be asked. Perhaps the question we should be asking is: ‘is war even a moral issue?’ If fighting is part of human nature as realist theory proclaims, then do we need to justify it? If indeed the act of war is regulated by a type of moral awareness (Bull, 1983: 186; Wight, 1991: 217-218), which would explain the need for justification, why then does it take place at all? *Deuteronomy*, also known as the *Second Book of Laws* (a well known book from the Old Testament) has an alarmingly cold attitude towards other nations that were at war with the Jews: “thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth: but thou shalt utterly destroy them” (Chaliand, 1994: 59-60). It could be argued that when war is a matter of survival, then one should not be restricted by any moral consciousness, and instead pursue it wholeheartedly as God allegedly said unto the Jews in *Deuteronomy*. As Clausewitz wrote, in his book *On War*: “war is such a dangerous business that mistakes which come from kindness are the very worst.” (1993: 84). One could also argue that it is a government’s moral duty to defend its citizens, thus war would be morally right on the basis of self-defence or pre-emptive attack. Following this logic, war should be exempt from any moral or just questioning concerning the treatment of other states, while paradoxically being subject to moral decisions concerning the welfare of its own citizens. This reasoning however, produces a problem: deciding the point at which a state is in mortal danger or when one should pre-emptively attack a suspected hostile state. This problem has been successfully exploited in many situations, a prime example being that of the current war in Iraq. If one was to conduct a ‘just’ war then presumably non-combatants would be immune from any maltreatment (Kasai, 1993: 244-47; Oppenheim, 1952: 231; Wight, 1991: 217); yet in the Second World War, the Luftwaffe systematically bombed British cities in order to reduce the morale of the British public and of British soldiers (Overy, 2005: 274). The British responded in kind. Another example would be that of the Vietnam War, in which America employed the use of napalm and other chemical weapons (Best et al, 2007: 294-296) without any recourse to civilian suffering, an interesting parallel to the war in Iraq (“collateral damage” (Cordesman, 2003: 246-48)). Do these examples show that waging war with the intention of winning, out-weigh moral and just considerations? It would seem so, as Machiavelli grimly writes in *The Discourses*: “men never do good unless necessity drives them to it.” (2003a: 112).

Wight and Bull, having established that war is an inseparable part of international relations (Dunne, 1998: 53; Bull, 1983: 184) go on to explain its place in international society. Bull explains the purpose of war from three perspectives: “that of the individual state, that of the system of states and that of the society of states” (1983: 186). From the view of an individual state, war is simply seen, by Bull, as a political tool to pursue state interests (Bull: 1983: 187). From a systemic view, he explains that war “shapes” the international system; it decides: what states

What is Distinctive About English-school Attitudes to War?

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remain in the system (i.e. destruction or survival), how states are governed and by whom, the outcome of disputes and ultimately the 'balance of power' (Bull, 1983: 187). So far what Bull has explained is tangible and familiar. It is his third perspective that is quite distinctive. From the point of view of a society of states, he explains, war has a "duel aspect" (Bull, 1983: 187). War in a society of states is representative of disorder. This disorder causes the society of states to reduce the impact of war on the system by creating rules and regulations (Bull, 1983: 188; Linklater and Suganami, 2006: 117-18). The society of states then uses war as a means to enforce these rules and conventions: thus war also becomes a tool of international society (Bull: 1983: 188). Wight's theory is less explicit. He agrees with the idea of formulating rules and regulations to curtail war (Wight, 1993: 218) but does not exactly point out the function of war; he writes: "the purpose and conduct of war is occupied by the doctrine of the just war" (Wight, 1993: 217). He recognizes war as "a necessary evil" (Wight, 1991: 207) but from the previous statement we can assume that Wight concurs with Bull (chronologically speaking Bull's idea was influenced by Wight) that war can be a regulator of justice in international society (Wight, 1993: 217; Linklater and Suganami, 2006: 131).

Bull and Wight conclude that war is used by international society as a means to regulate justice (Bull, 1983: 188; Wight, 1991: 207-18). This conclusion immediately presents some difficulties. Without any international governing body, who decides what is just and unjust? Bull states: "international law can be enforced only by particular states able and willing to take up arms on its behalf" (Bull, 1983: 188). Justice is, after all a subjective concept; so are we to leave the decision of justice to a coalition of willing states? What if these states happen to be military powers? Thus international justice would be at the mercy of a 'judicial dictatorship' of the strongest. To use the Iraq war as an example, America and its allies decided that an invasion of Iraq was just, based on the probability that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, "American claim to a right of pre-emptive attack...seemed to be stretching to breaking point the principles of international law." (Howard, 2001: 119). This is an excellent illustration of how justice can be defined in many ways. A much earlier example could be that of the Second World War and the policy of appeasement in the 1930s. Was it indeed just for Britain and France to "allow" Hitler to annex Austria and the Sudeten territories of Czechoslovakia (Best et al, 2007: 173-175)? Britain and France blatantly let its ally be 'butchered', so to speak, in order to divert a war, which they only postponed, due to their gross miscalculation of Hitler's personality and intentions. This is yet another classic case of power politics. So can war be used as a regulator of justice? I think it is an unrealistic and altruistic idea based on a conception that can be interpreted, or indeed warped, into many definitions. Machiavelli writes: "princes who have achieved great things have been those who have given their word lightly...and who, in the end, have overcome those abiding by honest principles." (2003b: 56).

From what has been discussed, we can see the stances of both Wight and Bull clearly. To them war is an essential component of international relations (Wight, 1991: 207) that is regulated by "norms" (Bull, 1983: p184). They believe that war should be waged with reference to morality and justice (Wight, 1991: 217) (with rules formulated to that effect) and that the purpose and existence of war is as an instrument of international society used to enforce international justice (Bull, 1983: 188; Wight, 1991: 207-18). As is often the case, theory differs widely from practice. Is there a war that demonstrates these principles? There are many to the contrary, from both ancient history and recent history; the brutal colonization of India, Africa and Latin America by the European powers (Best et al, 2007: 80-81), the First and Second World Wars, the Vietnam War and the current Iraq War, to name but a few. In my opinion, war waged as a just activity is impossible. As we have seen from the above examples, states are all too willing to pursue self-interests. For this idea to work, the consensus of all states would be necessary, but because there is no central authority that has absolute sovereignty and because politicians and commanders do not think alike, it will remain but a theory. When states become desperate, then legal, moral or just restrictions would be discarded in favour of survival; the only truly 'just' war from any perspective. Machiavelli quotes Livy: "Because a necessary war is a just war and where there is hope only in arms, those arms are holy" (2003b: 83). In conclusion, war will remain an intuition of international relations. It is a social activity that will, in the future, be waged justly or unjustly, morally or amorally, necessarily or unnecessarily, simply because there will always be a perspective that thinks the contrary. "Attached to force are certain self-imposed, imperceptible limitations hardly worth mentioning, known as international law and custom, but they scarcely weaken it" (Clausewitz, 1993: 83).

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What is Distinctive About English-school Attitudes to War?

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What is Distinctive About English-school Attitudes to War?

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Date written: November 2007