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MORAL VICTORIES
The Ethics of Winning Wars

Edited by

Andrew R. Hom, Cian O'Driscoll, & Kurt Mills

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Introduction

Moral Victories—The Ethics of Winning Wars

Cian O'Driscoll and Andrew R. Hom

INTRODUCTION

There is a poem called 'Smile, Smile, Smile' by Wilfred Owen that captures in a most poignant way many of the key themes that this book addresses. The poem, set in World War I, depicts a number of scrappy, wounded soldiers huddling over a copy of the previous day's newspaper that had belatedly made its way to the front. The headlines puff up Britain's most recent victories, while glossing over the losses that were incurred in their achievement.

> Head to limp head, the sunk-eyed wounded scanned
> Yesterday's *Mail*; the casualties (typed small)
> And (large) Vast Booty from our Latest Haul.   (Owen 2015: 17)

The soldiers also read of the houses that will be built for them when the war is won, and of the aerodromes that must be built in the meantime—the promise of an easy life allayed until the fighting is through. There is further cold comfort for the soldiers in the newspaper's declaration that the fighting will not be over any time soon. The sacrifices of their fallen comrades had to be vindicated, they read, and so the war would continue until victory was well and truly theirs:

> Peace would do wrong to our undying dead,
> The sons we offered might regret they died
> If we got nothing lasting in their stead.
> We must all be solidly indemnified.
> Though all be worthy Victory which all bought.

As with the best of Owen's poetry, biting irony prefigures the questions he would have his reader contemplate. What is victory in war? What is it truly

worth to us? If one is fighting for a just cause, would it be a dereliction of duty to settle for anything less than victory? Can victory ever be worthy of the sacrifices rendered by young men and women in its pursuit? What is its relation to the peace that everyone hopes will come once the smoke has cleared on the battlefield? This book tackles these questions.

VICTORY ABOUNDS

General Douglas MacArthur (1951) proclaimed that the very object of war is victory: 'In war there is no substitute for victory.' MacArthur was not the first to issue such a claim. The notion that war is, for better or worse, all about victory has a long and storied history. In the classical world, Aristotle (1996: 3) defined victory as the *telos* of military science, meaning that it is the animating purpose of all military activities. Cicero (1998: 83) endorsed a similar claim. Beyond the western world, Sun Tzu described victory as 'the main object in war' (quoted in McNeilly 2015: 16). In more modern times, Napoleon founded the French military academy at Saint-Cyr in the early nineteenth century to train the nation's soldiers how to be victorious. Victory, it seems, is central to how war is understood and approached. Winning, to extend a popular sporting cliché, is not just the most important thing; it is the *only* thing (Sayre 1955).

Nor is this perspective confined to the distant past. In May 1940 Prime Minister Winston Churchill put the case for the necessity of British involvement in World War II in terms of victory: 'You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: victory—victory, victory at all costs, victory however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival' (quoted in Bond 1996: 142). In the 1980s, the so-called Powell–Weinberger doctrine (now more commonly known as the Powell doctrine) recast US military doctrine in terms of the strategic imperative of victory: 'When we commit our troops to combat we must do so with the sole object of winning. Once it is clear that our troops are required, because our vital interests are at stake, then we must have the firm national resolve to commit every ounce of strength necessary to win the fight' (Weinberger 1984).

Toward the current era, President George W. Bush (2003) famously announced 'Mission accomplished' in the Iraq War in May 2003—a formulation reprised by Prime Minister David Cameron in Afghanistan in late 2013 (Mason 2013). More recently, the December 2015 parliamentary debate in the United Kingdom on the decision to intervene against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Syrian territory turned on the issue of victory. Proponents of military action, including Cameron's government, argued that the nature of the threat from ISIS was such that it simply had to be defeated;

failure to procure victory against ISIS would, the Prime Minister submitted, be catastrophic for international peace and security. Challenging this view, Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the opposition, claimed that in the absence of a clear conception of how victory over ISIS would be achieved, or even what it would comprise, it would be irresponsible to let slip the dogs of war. And most recently of all, Donald Trump rode a discourse of victory all the way to the American Presidency, promising often and loudly, 'We're going to win at every level . . . we're going to win so much, you may even get tired of winning.' Undeterred by the exhaustion of success, Trump further declared, 'We have to keep winning, we have to win more, we're going to win more!'[1]

The point to glean from this is the sheer ubiquity of victory talk. It redounds throughout human history, from antiquity to the age of Trump. Yet its prevalence masks a problem. Despite its common usage, the issue arises that it can be difficult to discern exactly what victory might mean or entail in a concrete situation. As Michael Walzer (2015: 110) has observed, even if it is 'urgent to win, it is not always clear what winning is'. None less than General Tommy Franks (2006: 8) echoed this view when he emphasized the importance of asking what we actually mean when we refer to victory in war: 'What constitutes victory? I think that is a fundamental question, and it is good for each of us . . . to ask ourselves that from time to time. When we try to decide whether or not we've been victorious, we have to think, for just a second, what the term "victory" means.'

TROPHIES AND TRIUMPHS

What does victory mean, then? And how would we know it if we saw it? The ancient Greeks had an answer to these questions. Their ideal of warfare involved two armies, comprising massed ranks of heavy infantry (or phalanxes), clashing in pitched battle on a level field. Much grappling, hacking, and slashing would ensue until one army succeeded in breaking through its enemy's ranks and driving it from the field of battle. Putting the enemy to flight gave the dominant side command of the battlefield. It would then confirm this victory by returning to the point where enemy forces had first turned tail and fled (which was known as the *trope*, or turning point) and constructing there a rudimentary battlefield trophy (or *tropaion*). The erection of the trophy formally concluded the battle by affirming the victory of one side and the defeat of the other. The simple fact that the victor had sufficient command of the battlefield to erect a trophy unopposed was proof of its

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[1] See Hom and O'Driscoll (2017).

success. By the same token, the vanquished army's demonstrable inability to prevent the trophy's construction confirmed its defeat. The trophy, then, functioned as a marker that both signalled the conclusion of a battle and locked in its result (van Wees 2004: 136–8).

The Romans went one better by marking victories with a triumph procession. This was an occasion of great pageantry. The honoured general, or *triumphator*, was invited by the Senate to stage a dramatic, ritualized return to Rome (Beard 2007: 81–2). The victorious commander, having been granted permission by the Senate to celebrate a triumph, would enter Rome via a ceremonial gate, the *Porta Triumphalis*, and lead his troops along a symbolic route through the streets of the city to the Capitol, where he would lay a spray of laurel in the lap of the statue of Jupiter. Preceded by a chain gang of shackled enemy captives, and accompanied by trumpeters, flag-bearers, wagons freighted with booty, and treasure chests overflowing with seized bullion, the commander rode in a ceremonial chariot. Garbed in a purple tunic embroidered with stars, and with his face dyed red, he carried a sceptre. Flanking him in the chariot, a slave was commissioned to hold a golden crown above his head and whisper softly in his ear a warning that all glory is fleeting: 'Remember you are just a man.' The lavish pageant would culminate with the execution of the least fortunate captives and the dispatch of the rest to slavery, the performance of sacrifices, and a rowdy street party that would last long into the night. As well as permitting Rome an opportunity to rejoice in the glory of its imperial expansion, the triumph also came over time to be regarded as a marker or final proof of victory. It is for this reason that Cicero (2006: 55) referred to the triumphs celebrated by Publius Servilius as 'the gratifying spectacle of captured enemies in chains'. These events were both popular and necessary, he explained, 'because there is nothing sweeter than victory, and there is *no more definite proof of victory* than seeing the people you have many times been afraid of being led in chains to their execution' (Cicero 2006: 55, emphasis added).

What is notable about the Greek and Roman cases is that the practice of warfare was centred on a delimited battle and subject to a widely accepted means of determining who the winner was. Some scholars contend that these conditions endured more or less intact until the eighteenth or possibly even nineteenth century (Whitman 2012). The problem with modern warfare is that it does not conform to these strictures, but is instead a rather more amorphous proposition. Ever since success in battle ceased to function as the prime determinant and/or marker of victory in war, it has become harder to ascertain not only who the winners and losers are in any given conflict, but even whether the conflict in question is over. Phil Klay (2014: 77) captures the results of this in an excellent collection of short stories on the Iraq War, *Redeployment*: 'Success was a matter of perspective. In Iraq it had to be. There was no Omaha Beach, no Vicksburg Campaign, not even an Alamo to signal a

clear defeat. The closest we'd come were those toppled Saddam statues, but that was years ago.'[2]

DEGRADE AND DESTROY

The difficulties posed by defining victory and identifying it in practice come into sharp focus when we consider the so-called 'War on Terror': a war that lacks not only a conventional enemy, but also a conventional battlefield. What can victory mean in such a contest? Does it mean the root and branch eradication of Al Qaeda, or even the elimination of terrorism *tout court*? And how would one gauge progress toward these ends? As the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, complained in 2003, 'We lack a metrics to know if we are winning or losing the Global War on Terror' (quoted in Mandel 2006: 135).[3] Four years later, General David Petraeus echoed Rumsfeld's consternation. It is hard to know if you are winning the fight against Al Qaeda, he remarked, because 'this is not the sort of struggle where you take a hill, plant the flag, and go home with a victory parade' (Tran 2008). Writing in 2010, Andrew Bacevich (2010: 10) noted that policymakers still 'do not have the foggiest notion of what victory would look like, how it would be won, and what it might cost'. President Barack Obama signalled his awareness of these and related issues when he initiated a shift in the 'War on Terror' discourse away from 'victory' and towards less freighted terms, such as 'success' and 'progress' (Martel 2007: 17).[4] As Obama explained, it was natural to feel some anxiety 'about using the word "victory", because, you know, it invokes this notion of Emperor Hirohito coming down and signing a surrender to MacArthur' (quoted in Blum 2013: 421). While this may be a powerful image, it is neither true to life in the twenty-first century, nor an especially helpful artifice.

The war against ISIS underscores these issues. As noted (see 'Victory Abounds'), the main plank of the argument employed by opponents of UK military involvement against ISIS in Syria was that it would be lunacy to initiate hostilities without a clear conception of the kind of victory sought and how it would be accomplished.[5] Their concerns were not allayed by the vague

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[2] This is redolent of President George H. W. Bush's response to Allied victory in the 1991 Gulf War. On the night of victory, he wrote in his diary: 'Still no feeling of euphoria. I think I know why it is.... It hasn't been a clean end—there is no battleship Missouri surrender' (quoted in Rose 2010: 226).

[3] For more discussion on this, see Record (2003: 5–6).

[4] The word 'victory' did not appear once in Obama's December 2009 West Point speech on the war in Afghanistan.

[5] This is redolent of the writings of Carl von Clausewitz: 'No one starts a war—or rather, no one in his sense ought to do so—without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve

and expansive (if pleasingly alliterative) war aims stated by the US and its allies: to 'degrade and destroy' ISIS. Critics carped that these objectives, designed for media consumption and not for the task at hand, were calibrated to neither the facts on the ground nor the West's reliance on air power. Such a strategy, it was warned, would not vanquish ISIS, but would instead merely prompt it to switch its attention from domestic operations to terroristic enterprises abroad (Hom 2016; McIntosh 2014, 2016).

   This is not to gainsay the success that the anti-ISIS coalition has enjoyed; it has been significant, especially in the latter half of 2016. Rather, it is to highlight the difficulties that arise when talking about contemporary armed conflict in terms of winning. As Robert Mandel (2007: 18) notes, it is increasingly utopian to believe that wars end with a 'clean, decisive victory for one side or the other'. Contemporary conflicts more often degenerate into a quagmire. Armies that have ostensibly been defeated melt away only later to re-emerge and carry on the fight by irregular means.

   Mandel's emphasis on endings alerts us to the temporal issues permeating victory discourse. Victory is typically evoked to mark the close of what we commonly call 'wartime', a period of existential crisis during which exceptional powers and policies take hold and are justified by the idea that they are temporary (Dudziak 2012). As such, it not only demarcates the threshold between 'war' and 'peace', it also suggests the possibility of a decisive end to a discrete period of violence, and the promise of a better future. Such temporal visions do not comport with contemporary conflicts, which seldom conclude in any clear-cut fashion and instead threaten to segue into a form of 'forever war' (Filkins 2008). Viewed from such a temporal perspective, it is tempting to conclude that nobody wins wars anymore; at most, one side loses more slowly than the other.[6]

MORAL VICTORIES

Irrespective of the problems that arise when one discusses modern war in the idiom of victory, it is nigh impossible to speak about it otherwise. Efforts to jettison the term 'victory' and substitute notions like 'success' in its place may be attractive at first glance. But upon further inspection they reveal themselves to be merely window dressing: a recoding of the problem rather than its

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by the war and how he intends to conduct it' (Clausewitz 1976: 579). For more on Clausewitz, see Chapter 2 of this volume.

   [6] This is a paraphrase from a scene in the HBO television series, *The Wire*. It also calls to mind Kenneth Waltz's observation that in modern war 'there is no victory, only varying degrees of defeat' (Waltz 2001: 1).

resolution. Moreover, such efforts distract from the fundamental point that, no matter how vexatious it may be, the concept of victory is hardwired into how we think and talk about and practise warfare. It therefore behoves us not to shy away from analysing victory, but instead to embrace the opportunity it presents. This will involve asking how one can discern a just from an unjust victory, and how best to balance the obligation to wage wars justly against the imperative to win them. This returns us to the questions that Owen's poem, which opened this discussion, introduces for consideration. To the degree that one is fighting for a just cause, would it be a dereliction of duty to settle for anything less than victory? Can victory ever be worthy of the sacrifices rendered by young men and women in its pursuit? And what is its relation to the peace that everyone hopes will emerge once the guns have fallen silent?

How should one set about answering these questions? The literature on victory, which is largely the preserve of military historians and strategists, is not much help here. Although there is an expansive body of scholarship on victory, it does not engage in a sustained or substantive way with ethical issues.[7] Instead it pursues four principal avenues of inquiry. The first comprises efforts to devise typologies of victory that would enable military planners to delineate tactical victories from operational and strategic victories (Martel 2007). The second traces the evolution of victory as a concept and the impact of successive revolutions in military affairs upon it (Bond 1996; Hobbs 1979). The third addresses the issue of how victory should be understood in respect of the particularities of contemporary armed conflict (Angstrom and Duyvesteyn 2007). The fourth sets out a case for why, despite its tarnished reputation, victory is still a vital concept through which to understand warfare today (Gray 1979; Luttwak 1982). These discussions either marginalize or ignore ethical concerns.

The normative literature on war may be of greater assistance. This includes those strands of political realism that take its ethical implications seriously (Hom forthcoming). It also includes certain forms of pacifism. The challenge set forth by Erasmus of Rotterdam is most instructive in this regard: 'Let him apply just a little reason to the problem by counting up the true cost of the war and deciding whether the object he seeks to achieve by it is worth that much, even if he were certain of victory, which does not always favour even the best of causes' (quoted in Reichberg et al. 2006: 235). Yet it is arguably just war thinking that furnishes us with the most resources for making sense of the ethical questions that victory in war raises. This is true regardless of whether one prefers to treat just war thinking as a protean historical tradition or as a contemporary application of moral philosophical reasoning (O'Driscoll 2013). In either case it supplies a conceptual vocabulary that is tailored to teasing out

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[7] The chief exception is Mandel (2006). Martel (2007) also incorporates a normative dimension into his analysis, but it is not his focus.

the moral dilemmas that wars (and indeed the challenge of winning them) precipitate. And yet, as we shall see, just war thinkers have generally been reticent to engage the idea of victory. This belies some deep tensions between the just war ethos, which emphasizes temperance and humility, and the baggage that victory brings with it: adversarialism, triumphalism, and vainglory. There is much to be explored here, and much fertile soil to plough.

TRADITIONS AND CHALLENGES

This book is an attempt to set about this task. It derives from a workshop hosted in Glasgow in the summer of 2015. Its aim was to bring together scholars from different disciplines—International Relations, Strategic Studies, Religious Ethics, History, and Philosophy—to consider how we might better understand the concept of victory and in particular its ethical elements. This conference resulted in a series of further conversations and invitations and, ultimately, the collection of essays gathered here, which is divided into two main parts. The first examines the intellectual resources and *traditions* that may help us better understand and engage the concept of victory. In particular, it focuses on teasing out what one might call the ethical component of victory. How, in other words, should we understand victory today, and what might it mean to think of victory as an ethical category? The second extends those resources and traditions to treat a series of contemporary *challenges* relating to victory. The remit here is to examine how and to what degree the concept of victory is applicable to, and helps us gain critical purchase on, the ethical issues that arise in the context of the contemporary security environment.

Part I, 'Traditions', explores the principal sources of western thinking about victory. Chapter 2 by John Kelsay kicks off proceedings with an analysis of how victory is posited in religious sources. Focusing on the Jewish and Christian traditions in particular, he contends that the different conceptions of victory presented in the Bible form the seedbed for later notions of victory in western discourses of war and peace. Chapter 3 by Sibylle Scheipers extends the conversation to the foundations of modern strategic thought, with a discussion of Carl von Clausewitz's writings on war. Contrary to the standard view that Clausewitz articulated a purely instrumental conception of victory in war, Scheipers reveals that he also understood winning in moral terms. Chapter 4 by Beatrice Heuser looks at the role that commemorative practices play in how historical societies have thought about victory. It presents a probing analysis of 'moral victories', that is, military defeats that have been recast in the popular or national imagination as a source of pride and unity. Her study, which takes in a number of historical and contemporary cases, notes the potential for such 'moral victories' to thwart peacemaking and fuel

further hostilities. Chapter 5 by James Turner Johnson turns to the treatment of victory in the just war tradition. Drawing on the works of, among others, Thomas Aquinas and Hugo Grotius, it examines the proposition that certain causes are sufficiently important to justify a win-at-all-costs disposition. Chapter 6 by Chris Brown wraps up Part I by carrying the focus on just war thinking through to the present day and examining how victory has changed in light of the recent revisionist turn in just war theory. He offers a stark warning that efforts to replace the Law of Armed Conflict with International Human Rights Law are misguided and to be resisted.

Part II, 'Challenges', examines the continuing relevance of the ways of thinking about victory set out in Part I to contemporary international relations. Can these ways of thinking about victory illuminate the challenges international society confronts today, and how should they be revised in light of these challenges? Chapter 7 by Eric Patterson sets the ball rolling with a conceptual analysis of victory itself. He connects victory to the values of order, justice, and conciliation, and offers a stout defence of its continued utility as an ethical category. Chapter 8 by Dominic Tierney responds with a discussion of whether the concept of victory is applicable when wars are increasingly unwinnable. How, he asks, in an era in which decisive victory is no longer a plausible objective, should we think about the ethics and ends of warfare? Chapter 9 by Luke Campbell and Brent Steele develops this discussion by scrutinizing the notion of 'finality' that is part and parcel of how scholars and military practitioners think and talk about victory. By shifting the register from conclusive ends to contingent and 'affective' processes, Campbell and Steele suggest a different way of conceptualizing victory, one that takes openness rather than decisiveness as its locus.

Chapters 10 through 13 interrogate these themes in light of the different forms contemporary warfare takes. In Chapter 10 Kurt Mills deliberates upon what victory can mean in the context of humanitarian interventions and actions taken under the umbrella of the Responsibility to Protect. He looks beyond the kinetics of conflict itself and towards post-conflict justice mechanisms for answers to this question. Chapter 11 by David Whetham treats the role of victory in civil–military relations. Drawing on a case study from the United Kingdom, he explores how affected populations respond to the loss of blood and treasure in wars where no victory is in sight. Chapter 12 by Amy Eckert extends the discussion of victory to the realm of private warfare. She asks how private military companies (PMCs) fulfil and impact the related tasks of winning wars and making peace. In Chapter 13, Daniel Brunstetter ponders how victory should be understood in respect of the use of military force short of war. This leads to a broader discussion of the limits of just war reasoning and the need for a *jus ad vim* framework that can provide resources for the ethical analysis of small-scale military operations, such as the use of drone strikes and commando raids. In the volume's conclusion,

we will recapitulate and tease out several key themes from these chapters, reflect on how victory changes our understanding of the ethics of war, and provide some suggestions for future research.

CONCLUSION

The essays that comprise this book turn on one profoundly simple yet agonizingly difficult question: War, what is it good for? As one would expect, the contributors to this volume do not all agree with one another about what the *correct* answers to this question is, or even about what might be the right way to tackle it. They do all speak in unison, however, about the importance of grappling with it. Moreover, the essays presented here converge on the point of view that this question cannot be usefully addressed from a purely ethical, political, or strategic perspective. Rather, they argue, it must be engaged in a composite manner that brings together all three modes of reasoning. Viewed as a whole, then, this book offers a set of reflections on how this might be achieved. As such, it represents a tentative first step towards fostering a long-overdue dialogue between the apostles of Augustine on the one hand and the followers of Clausewitz on the other. Whether or not it is successful—or should we say 'victorious'—in this endeavour will be for others to determine.

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Part I

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