Interests, Necessity, and Justice

By

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Abstract

The concepts of interest and necessity are examined in relation to conceptions of justice. It is argued that the social contract formulation of justice concerns interests, and permits the violation of individual human life if deemed necessary in the defense of interest. It is further argued that the social contract, as a formulation of justice, ultimately rests on justice construed as desert. In fact, interest and necessity are seemingly disentangled from justice when the concerns of justice are focused on the other rather than on the interested parties, when justice is defined as desert, and when desert is formulated into principle. Yet just war theory shows that the principle of desert is easily corrupted in the service of interest, and broken in the name of necessity. An alternative conception of justice, the principle of a universal reverence for human life, without condition, exception, or judgment, is considered and its implications are drawn.

Introduction

Proponents of the social contract formulation of justice have either confounded justice with interest or have defined justice in terms of interest. John Rawls (1971, p. 11, italics added), for example, claimed that principles of justice are those that “free and rational persons concerned to further their own interests would accept in an initial position of equality.” Moreover, it is commonplace for individuals and groups to justify actions taken to protect their interests or that of others – even if violative of still others – in terms of the necessity of such actions for the goal of such protection. They claim to act in the name of justice. Kant (1797/1996, 6:229-231) proposed that coercion (even to the extent of violence) is not contrary to justice if employed to defend an individual’s freedom from someone infringing upon it.¹

Yet Kant and Rawls also spoke of a sense of justice that seems to refer to an obligation not to harm others, and to the inviolability of the individual. Rawls (1971, p. 3) claimed that each person “possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override.” Kant (1785/1998, 4:428, italics in the original) posited that individuals have “absolute worth,” not merely worth “for us,” and exist as ends “such as no other end, to which they would serve merely as
means,” can be put in their place, since their worth is not “conditional” and “contingent.” It is in this context that he put forth his second formulation of the categorical imperative: “So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” (Kant, 1785/1998, 4:429). Such words express a principle of reverence for human life without exception, condition, exclusion, or judgment, regardless of interests, contracts, or necessity.

My aim here is to examine the concepts of interest and necessity in relation to conceptions of justice, and the contradictions that arise in attempting to simultaneously reason from interest and necessity on the one hand, and a principle concerning the unconditional valuing of human life on the other. I will argue that the social contract formulation (in general), although concerned with interest, ultimately depends on justice construed as desert. Using examples from just war theory, I further argue that the principle of desert is readily corrupted in the service of interest, and contradicted in the name of necessity. Finally, I propose that the only way out of this conundrum is to construe justice as the principle of a universal reverence for human life, without condition, exception, or judgment, and to aspire toward it.

Reason

We may reason from interest, or we may reason from the moral value of the sanctity of human life. In the latter case, we must conclude that if my life is not to be violated, then equivalently, others’ lives are not to be violated, because a value on human life makes no distinction between my life, or some lives, and others’ lives. Once we accept the sanctity of human life as a moral value (as Kant and Rawls seem to do), the obligation to respect life and not to violate it is a moral one, not a contractual one. If human life is sacred, it remains so regardless of contracts or others’ broken contractual obligations.

John Locke (1689/1963, p. 341), in his second treatise of government, averred that “no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions.” But he added: “Every one, as he is bound to preserve himself…so by the like reason, when his own preservation comes not in competition, ought he, as much as he can, to preserve the rest of mankind, and may not, unless it be to do justice to an offender, take away or impair the life, or what tends to the preservation of life, the liberty, health, limb, or goods of another.” Thus, according to Locke, there are limits to a person’s obligation to act to preserve the lives of others, and those limits arise when his or her own preservation is in jeopardy.
Locke, it can be said, reasons from the moral value of the sanctity of human life, but with (practical) restrictions stemming from interest. Or conversely, it can be said that he reasons from interest, but with moral restrictions. In the course of pursuing or defending one’s interests, it is sometimes necessary to violate others. In such a case, a reason is given for the violation of another, not a statement of conformity with principle arrived at through reason.

We can try to make Locke’s argument without resort to interest. If we believe in the sanctity of human life and wish to uphold that value, then we must protect human life against those who threaten human life and who, in the process of pursuing whatever goals they may have, are willing to destroy human lives. In the course of promoting the moral value of the sanctity of human life, we may find it necessary to destroy some lives. But at this point we face our violation of reason in regard to nondiscrimination as applied to the sanctity of human life. The value to be protected or upheld – the nonviolation of human life – is contradictorily violated in the actions prescribed. We are willing to violate certain lives, in the interests of other lives. Hence, in arguing for necessity we are reasoning from interest, not principle.

Desert

The concepts of defense and necessity focus on those whose interests we wish to protect. Defense is necessity in regard to interest. As already alluded to, there is a philosophical tradition, as well as a general tendency, to invoke these concepts to justify violent actions, and to define acts, so conceptualized, as just in regard to those who are to be protected. Talk of “rights” is enlisted to proclaim that conduct that would be unjust or immoral under other circumstances, are just and moral under these circumstances. Thus we speak of the “right of self-defense.” But what of justice concerning those to be violated in the process of such protection?

Locke, in the above quotation, asserts that no one may harm or violate (take away or impair) the life of another unless it be to do justice to the offender. Thus Locke proclaims not only that we have a right, under justice, to defend our interests against encroachment by an offender, but that in violating the offender, justice will be done. In other words, the offender deserves to be violated, and we can call such violation, under certain circumstances, justice.

So other than reasons from interest, and declarations of rights to self-defense, it is the concept of desert that is used to justify actions performed in defense of interest. In the invocation of necessity, the obligation not to harm human life is implicitly accepted, for we do not feel called upon to rationalize acts that do not violate human life. But if we are to appeal to justice, then we must go beyond
justification in terms of the protection of interest, to the justice of the fate of others who are violated in the course of such protection. Hence we employ the concept of desert. In fact, one cannot incorporate interest and necessity into the concept of justice without defining justice in terms of desert.

We must then distinguish between “innocent” human lives and the lives of those who would violate those lives. We have an interest (even derived from our belief in the sanctity of human life) in protecting the former from the latter, whom we designate as fair game for being “guilty.” That is, the latter are “deserving” of what we find it necessary to do in order to defend others from them. In the individual instance, the distinction seems easy: it is reasonable that in order to defend my own life (in this case, derived from self-interest perhaps even without reference to the sanctity of human life other than my own) I may injure or kill the aggressor, the guilty individual. I even say that I have a “right” to do so. My interest may even extend to others, either through affection and sentiment for particular others, or through reason in regard to nondiscrimination as applied to the sanctity of human life, although with the operative limitations set by the distinction between the “innocent” and “guilty.” Hence I might come to the defense of an individual other than myself, injure or kill the aggressor, claim that he or she deserved it, and say that I had a right to act as I did. I may even sacrifice myself in the process. In any of these instances, however, the reasoning is from interest.

John Stuart Mill (1863/1990, p. 466, italics in original) maintained, in his essay on “Utilitarianism,” that “it is universally considered just that each person should obtain that (whether good or evil) which he deserves; and unjust that he should obtain a good, or be made to undergo an evil, which he does not deserve.” In common parlance, justice, if not equated with fairness itself, includes the notion of impartiality, or nondiscrimination. And indeed, justice as desert can be formulated as a universal principle, applied to all individuals without discrimination. All individuals without exception are to get what they deserve and deserve what they get, in the form of punishment or reward. In formulation into principle, to be universally applied, desert is seemingly divorced from interest.

Moreover, the principle of desert contains a logic of equivalence and reciprocity. It has the appearance of rationality and balance, in that actions are followed by reactions that are consistent with them. These aspects of desert are most dramatically expressed in statements in the Bible concerning negative desert. “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed” (Genesis 9:6; as translated in Jewish Publication Society, 1985). “He who fatally strikes a man shall be put to death” (Exodus 21:12). They are most famously expressed in the “eye for an eye” law of the talion (Exodus 21:22-24). There is a logic of equivalence concerning
the principle regarding the sanctity of human life, too, but it pertains to the equivalence of human life, and not to the equivalence of reciprocity or desert.

Desert, however, is the currency of contract formulations of justice. If there is a contract, even an implicit one, that we will not deliberately harm each other, then there is an expectation of reciprocity: I will not harm you, and you will not harm me. If you harm me anyway, we can say that you have broken the contract, and that you are not entitled to my abidance by it. But if you keep to the contract, you will be rewarded with my reciprocity. According to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762/2002, p. 178), the application of justice requires reciprocity, much as does a contract. In the state of nature, he said, “I owe nothing to those to whom I have promised nothing…” (p. 178). Surely, however, I only enter into a contract if it is in my interests to do so. I promise to do this, and you in turn promise to do that. And surely the “this” and the “that” are in our respective interests. Thus, in the contract formulation of justice, reciprocity is tied to interests. Contract formulations of justice concern interests and demand reciprocity.

Yet it is to be noted that Rawls (1971, pp. 114-115) claimed that we have natural duties, such as the “duty not to harm or injure another,” whether or not we have committed ourselves to these actions, and it is no defense or excuse to say that we have made no promise not to kill. He adds that “the natural duties are owed not only to definite individuals, say to those cooperating together in a particular social arrangement, but to persons generally.” Yet he also says that there are special reasons for which “one has the right to kill, perhaps in a situation arising in a just war.” Then on what grounds does Rawls make exceptions, such as in the example he cites? The “duty not to harm or injure another” (p. 114) really applies only to “the innocent” (chart on p. 109).

Thus interest and necessity are apparently disentangled from justice when the concerns of justice are focused on the other rather than on the interested parties, when justice is implicitly defined as desert, and when desert is formulated into principle. We then have reasoning from principle (i.e., all individuals should get what they deserve without exemption or exclusion) as opposed to reasoning from interest.

**Group Justice**

We have seen that Locke found it important to say that we *do justice* in harming offenders in the course of taking actions necessary to protect interest, thereby invoking the principle of desert. Indeed, he emphasizes the principle of individual desert throughout his second treatise of government. Yet, although characterizing a war of conquest or aggression as “an unjust war” (1689/1963, pp. 443-444), he also
speaks of “a right of war” (p. 349), and illustrates his arguments pertaining to right actions in war largely with metaphorical examples concerning individual aggressors and thieves (pp. 347-349, 443-445). He is thereby able to sidestep the challenges to the principle of individual desert posed by the group-oriented nature of war, addressing the latter only in regard to the aftermath of war (pp. 445-455).

Just war theory, in a positive view, sets limits as to when it is permissible to go to war, and to what actions are permissible in the course of war. By the same token, however, it delineates the conditions within war under which the killing of individuals will be morally excused and considered just, and the contexts in which going to war itself will be considered just. When Michael Walzer (1992, pp. 21-22) asserts that it is “wrong” to begin a war, his implication is that it is not always “wrong” to engage in war.

But insurmountable complications arise when we move from individual interactions to cases of interactions between groups, societies, and nations, and these have telling implications for even the former. Thus, in regard to war, those concerned with justice find it reasonable, as Rawls (1999, pp. 89-105) does, to distinguish between the defender and the aggressor, and between the aggressor state’s “leaders and officials, its soldiers, and its civilian population” (p. 94). Rawls assumes that “well-ordered” societies, such as liberal-democratic ones, “go to war only when they sincerely and reasonably believe that their safety and security are seriously endangered by the expansionist policies of outlaw states” (pp. 90-91). So we must only deal with the justice of war with the outlaw aggressor state. Rawls asserts that the leaders and officials of the aggressor state (together with “other elites who control and staff the state apparatus” and assist them) are responsible, for “they willed the war; and for doing that, they are criminals. But the civilian population, often kept in ignorance and swayed by state propaganda, is not responsible” (p. 95). Therefore attacks on civilian populations are “wrongs,” but by implication, the leaders and officials, being responsible for the war, are deserving of attack.

Further, according to Rawls (1999, pp. 95-96), “soldiers of the outlaw state, leaving aside the upper ranks of an officer class...are not responsible for their state’s war. For soldiers are often conscripted and in other ways forced into war; they are coercively indoctrinated in martial virtues; and their patriotism is often cruelly exploited. The reason why they may be attacked directly is not that they are responsible for the war, but that well-ordered peoples have no other choice. They cannot defend themselves in any other way, and defend themselves they must.” Hence, while not deserving of attack, the soldiers of the outlaw state must be attacked due to necessity, and the fact of such necessity is easily arrived at in reasoning from interest. Moreover, implicit in the fact that Rawls claims to be expounding here on
“just war doctrine,” and specifically on the “principles restricting the conduct of war,” such attack, being necessary in defense of interest, can be carried out in the name of justice.

For Walzer (1992, pp. 36-37, 299, 299n), too, soldiers are not responsible. Yet Walzer (pp. 145-146) recounts a different rationale for why soldiers may be attacked directly – the soldier “has allowed himself to be made into a dangerous man” (implying that he is deserving of attack?) – while reviewing finer distinctions that can be made within the civilian population. Perhaps we can or should (Walzer, although having reservations, considers it a “plausible line”) distinguish between civilians “who make what soldiers need to fight and those who make what they need to live, like all the rest of us. When it is militarily necessary, workers in a tank factory can be attacked and killed, but not workers in a food processing plant. The former are assimilated to the class of soldiers – partially assimilated, I should say, because these are not armed men, ready to fight, and so they can be attacked only in their factory (not in their homes)…” This slope is so slippery that only convoluted reasoning can save any member of the “enemy” group (other than children, and very young ones at that) from falling into the abyss below or, by the same token, condemn him or her to death.

Moreover, in a “supreme emergency” (Walzer, 1992, pp. 251 ff.; Rawls, 1999, pp. 98-99), all bets are off. The “supreme emergency exemption,” Rawls (1999, p. 98) posits, “allows us to set aside – in special circumstances – the strict status of civilians that normally prevents their being directly attacked in war.” Here he suggests that, during the early years of World War II: “When Britain was alone and had no other means to break Germany’s superior power, the bombing of German cities was arguably justifiable” (p. 98). He contrasts this situation with the United States’ fire-bombing of Japanese cities and its atom-bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, during which time, he claims, “the supreme emergency exemption never held” (p. 99). Yet, as Rawls acknowledges, American and other allied leaders argued that these actions were necessary to hasten the end of the war and thereby save lives. (According to Rawls, their concern was only for American and not Japanese lives. But any defensive war is presumably fought to save the lives on one’s own side from oppression, if not death. Moreover, Walzer [1992, p. 266] recounts that President Truman’s military advisors believed that without such actions, Japanese as well as American loss of life would be far higher.)

Rawls (1999, p. 100) claims that the failure of such reasons “to justify violations of the principles for the conduct of war is evident.” Yet the controversy over the “necessity” of the atom-bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki continues even today. I certainly do not wish to argue against Walzer’s and Rawls’ conclusions that these
actions were “wrong.” I merely claim that all such arguments for necessity in regard to interest are matters of justification and hence rationalization, not justice, even from the perspective of the principle of desert.

There are yet other “exemptions” under just war doctrine, such as the doctrine of double effect (Walzer, 1992, pp. 151-159, 170-175), whose limits are also arguable. “Double effect” allows that civilians may be killed, but only (barring a “supreme emergency”) if they were not deliberate targets, their deaths being incidental to an attack on a military target. Such deaths are often referred to as “collateral damage.” As Walzer (p. 174, italics in original) puts it: “A soldier must take careful aim at his military target and away from nonmilitary targets. He can only shoot if he has a reasonably clear shot; he can only attack if a direct attack is possible. He can risk incidental deaths, but he cannot kill civilians simply because he finds them between himself and his enemies.” Unfortunately for many civilians, such “incidental deaths” occur today not only by means of soldiers taking shots, but through “precision bombing.” Again, arguments of “necessity” are invoked.

Ultimately, just war doctrine entails the oxymoron of group justice. We can say that the enemy group deserves what it gets, because that group has broken its implicit social contract with us. But being aware of the contradiction – to our conviction that justice is an individual matter – that is thereby invoked, we fall back on the justification that our actions were necessary to defend our interests. Thus, the concerns of “justice” are once again focused on the interested parties rather than the other, and the application of principle is nullified. We call our justification by the name of justice, but what of justice concerning those who are violated in the process?

Perhaps the closest domestic parallel to killing “innocent” civilians of the enemy nation in time of war, and calling it necessary and therefore permissible under just war doctrine, would be violating a person in the course of pursuing the common good. But in positing that each person “possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override,” Rawls (1971, p. 3) rejects this utilitarian form of justice-as-necessity. The shooting down of a hijacked airliner about to be plunged into a skyscraper might also qualify as a close parallel. We would call such an incident unfortunate and tragic, but would we call it justice?

Imagine a man who is holding a hostage close to his body and about to shoot a police officer. The officer shoots at this man, but unintentionally hits the hostage also. We might say that the act was justifiable (in regard to interest) but we would not say that justice was served. We can even say that the officer was acting not only in his own interest, but in the interest of the hostage. Still, the outcome was unfortunate and tragic, but in no way just, even from the perspective of justice as desert, because
the hostage in no way got what she deserved. Similarly, we would not call by the
name of justice the unintentional killing, through “friendly fire,” of our own nation’s
military personnel or civilians in time of war.

**Does It Matter What We Call Justice?**

Although just war doctrine is meant to limit entry into war and destructive
conduct in war, it provides justification for such entry and such conduct. No nation
or group goes to war in the name of aggression, but only in the name of defense – of
something. And distinctions meant to demarcate classes of individuals it is
impermissible to kill at the same time emphasize which categories of individuals are
fair game, either by dint of guilt (and therefore desert) or necessity. Moreover, there
is apparently no clear limit to the rationalizations that the reasoning capacity of the
human mind is able to produce, if not constricted by principle. But the principle of
desert is not up to the task.

Indeed, it can be said that we who live in a society are responsible for our
government, its policies, and its actions, and that this is true of dictatorships as well as
democracies. As Mohandas Gandhi often said, no government, even the most
despoti, can exist without the cooperation of the people. Even Rawls would have to
agree that this is true of “well-ordered” societies, since their civilian populations,
unlike those of outlaw states, are not “kept in ignorance and swayed by state
propaganda,” as arguable as that proposition might be in the real world. But
terrorists, too, hold citizens of the “enemy” nations responsible for their
governments’ policies and actions, which they perceive as unjust. They seek
vengeance, and those responsible for the perceived injustices are, to them, deserving
of retribution. What is contested by others is not the principle of desert, but the
judgment of who is deserving of what.

The principle of desert, far from countering the terrorists’ line of reasoning, is
supportive of it, for it calls retribution justice, and justifies acts driven by the emotions
of vengeance. The principle of desert permits violence as a part of justice. Under
justice as desert, responsibility is equated with desert. Yet to whom violence is due
remains in the eye of the beholder. Moreover, the principle of desert is easily
corrupted for employment in the service of interest. Those who it is in our interest to
violate or whom we find it necessary to violate we designate as “guilty.” In going to
war and in the conduct of war, that is how we justify our violence toward certain
parties. When the elasticity of the claims of desert fails us (by reaching the point of
absurdity, such as attempting to justify the killing of babies by calling them “guilty”),
we fall back on necessity in regard to interest, and call it justice anyway.
In sum, when we perceive necessity in regard to interest, we try to extend the principle of desert to those we believe it necessary to kill or injure, or else we rationalize the breaking of that principle in the name of necessity. Group contracts are also implicitly invoked in place of individual contracts. Perhaps the killing of children can be used as a vehicle to inflict further pain upon the “enemy” adults. Since such group justice violates the principle of desert in regard to the children, we may additionally help ourselves to appear “moral” to ourselves and others by designating some limited situations, which do not even satisfy the quest for vengeance or the criterion of necessity, as immoral and unjust. For this celebration of righteousness, in other words, we reserve a space that has no other meaning or consequence for us.

We have to distinguish, then, between justice and justification, the latter being none other than the rationalization of actions we take that we perceive to be in our interests and necessary for the protection of those interests, and even of actions stemming from our desire for revenge. In suspending our presumed obligation not to harm others, the concept of desert may merely gives us license to justify, in the name of justice, violative actions taken to protect interests and to exact retribution.

Only when conceptions of justice are disentangled from interest and necessity can they be disentangled from violence. But they must also be disentangled from desert. Only principle can safeguard us against rationalization, but the principle of desert does not disallow violence, and lends itself to its rationalization. We are returned, then, to the principle of a universal reverence for human life, without condition, exception, or judgment, as a conception of justice. I refer to it as the principle of life affirmation. In accordance with this conception, we are all responsible for upholding the sanctity of human life, through our personal behavior, our social systems, our governments, and through our social and foreign policies from which our collective behavior ensues. But this responsibility, to which we hold ourselves and all other people, precludes the toleration of violence, in the name of justice, by ourselves or others, even as a means of retaliation against those perceived by us or others as failing to uphold that principle, or as rationalized in terms of interest or necessity.

You can kill in the name of desert, necessity, broken contracts, lack of reciprocity, and the like, but you cannot kill in the name of the principle of life affirmation, or justice so conceived. Unless we are willing to condemn violence absolutely, without resort to desert and necessity, we implicitly endorse a moral relativism in which violence is considered to be immoral and unjust under some conditions and in some situations. From the perspective of the principle of life
affirmation, whenever individuals are violated, and life not supported, then justice is violated. Life cannot be violated in the name of justice, for the violation of life is injustice, and justice resides in the nonviolation of life. This conception of justice, unlike the principle of desert, never lends itself to the justification of violence.²

Surely, no matter what we call justice, people will continue to pursue interests and act in the defense of interests, and will occasionally perceive acts of violence and war as necessary for self-preservation. Additionally, the desire for vengeance and desert is deeply rooted in human emotions. And although people are also motivated to justify their actions, they can easily reference such philosophical and religious pronouncements as are accommodative. But we formulate principles of justice as guides to our behavior and as ideals to be strived for, even if never to be perfectly attained, either by ourselves or others. And it is the ability to generate principles that gives human beings the capacity to transcend emotion. It is within our power to choose which principles to aspire to, and we must, and only can, begin with ourselves. Moreover, the matter of which principles we choose to aspire to is of the utmost practical significance.

Interest prods us to violate principle, whether it be the principle of desert or that of the dignity of human life. But principle itself may either press us to find the means to uphold it, or to employ it in the rationalization of actions taken in the support of interest. The principle of desert encourages us to do the latter, because it requires judgment of people and not only their actions. The principle of life affirmation, on the other hand, beckons us to more diligently consider the processes available to us through which we may pursue interest, before we declare the need to use violative means in the name of necessity.

Gandhi believed that it is in our * ignorance * that we might have to kill a man found in the act of killing other people (in Erikson, 1969, p. 422). He viewed resort to violence as a necessity due only to our current ignorance, but no less morally regrettable and inconsistent with justice for that. This is not a pacifist argument. In his development of the philosophy and strategies of nonviolence, Gandhi set himself the task of generating alternatives to violence as means for waging severe group conflict involving a clash of interests. If we were not to consider justifications for violence (in terms of interest, necessity, defense, and even desert) to be acceptable, then we would be more highly motivated to search for other means to protect our lives and interests. Gandhi applied reason to the task of developing alternative means to violence. He had faith in human reason to create and discover new ways of affirming life within the means, even if never perfectly fulfilling the principle of life affirmation.
Even Walzer (1992, p. 283) opines: “Nuclear war is and will remain morally unacceptable, and there is no case for its rehabilitation. Because it is unacceptable, we must seek out ways to prevent it…” Yet if we were to choose to do so, we could claim the same not only for nuclear war, but for war in general, and not only for war but for violative acts and omissions in regard to any individual human life, and thereby aspire toward the ideal of the principle of life affirmation.

In their Pastoral Letter on War and Peace, the United States Catholic Bishops (1983) condemned all use of nuclear weapons, for whatever purpose, as morally wrong. Although the foundation of the letter, and starting point of the bishops’ arguments, is the sanctity of human life, and specifically, the individual human life (pp. 3, 26), they morally isolate nuclear war from all war: “Nuclear weapons particularly and nuclear war as it is planned today raise new moral questions” (p. 13, italics added). In doing so, they rely heavily on just war doctrine and its attendant concepts of proportionality and discrimination. The bishops condemn nuclear warfare on both counts, concluding that the destruction incurred would not be proportionate “to the good expected by taking up arms” and such destruction would not discriminate between “innocent” persons, huge numbers of whom would die, and the “unjust aggressors” (pp. 11, 14). But the very concepts themselves are inconsistent with the fundamental value of the sanctity of the individual human life. If we begin with the sanctity of the individual human life, and that is to say, all human lives, then we cannot give moral approval, even under certain conditions, to the taking of certain quantities of lives or certain classes of lives.

Nuclear weaponry has not changed the moral issues. Judeo-Christian moral values, as well as those of other religions and philosophies throughout the world, pertain to the sanctity of each individual life, reflecting, as they do, the human sense of justice. We may call massive destruction a greater tragedy than more limited destruction, but the morality of the destruction of human life is not quantifiable. The destruction of many lives is immoral because the destruction of a single life is immoral. Hence, there is no moral line that can be drawn that would separate nuclear warfare from other types of warfare, the destruction of the many from the few, or the destruction of the few from the one. While even justice construed as desert, as well as justice construed as the principle of life affirmation, is an individual matter, destruction in the name of desert does not uphold the central value and sense of justice as that pertaining to the sanctity of human life. Violence stands in need of justification precisely because we believe it to be intrinsically immoral.

More consistent with their moral framework (the sanctity of human life), the bishops, in their pastoral letter, also proclaim that “(I)mmoral means can never be justified by the end sought” (United States Catholic Bishops, 1983, p. 21), and note
that “billions (are) readily spent for destructive instruments while pitched battles are waged daily in our legislatures over much smaller amounts for the homeless, the hungry and the helpless here and abroad” (p. 14).

If we were to regard all war, and all violations of human life, as violations of justice, we may be moved to not only develop alternative means of waging severe group conflict, but to work more diligently to prevent such conflicts from arising, and to take actions to affirm life by promoting the well-being of each and every human life. In affirming human life without regard to interest, we will be promoting the interests of all, and the perceived necessity of taking violative actions to protect one’s own interests may recede.

References


Notes

1. Although an individual and his or her life can be violated in many ways, I restrict the term “violence” to the infliction of physical injury, the extreme of which is death and maiming. When I speak of the violation of human life, I refer far more expansively to acts (and omissions) that disrespect, hinder, and do not support the integrity and well-being of the individual. Such acts may include, e.g., anything from verbal insults to the denial of educational opportunity. They also include extreme violence, which is the subject of many of the examples used in this essay. The violation of human life encompasses a continuum from mild to more severe. Killing is the ultimate violation of the individual and precludes, e.g., any further educational opportunity. Yet violence, too, contains a continuum, and is not always more severe than other violations of the individual. The infliction of a bruise upon an individual’s body is less violative of that individual than imprisonment, other forms of coercion, the denial of food or housing, or the restriction of educational opportunity. It is my conception of the nonviolation of human life (and later in this essay, “life affirmation”) that is more consistent with the concept of ahimsa as employed in Gandhian philosophy, i.e., not only not to harm in a negative sense, but to support and promote the well-being and flourishing of every individual life.

2. Within the realm of human life, the principle of life affirmation prescribes the valuing of each and every individual without exception or condition. But if life is to be valued in accordance with principle, then the logic of principle necessarily extends the valuing of life beyond human life, to all life. Despite the viability of vegetarianism, new issues are raised, of course. Should the life of an insect be considered equivalent in value to that of a human life, and how is life defined? According to Gandhi (1954, pp. 427-428), although abimsa is a comprehensive principle “we are helpless mortals caught up in the
conflagration of *bimsha*,” and the very fact of our living – “eating, drinking and moving about – necessarily involves some *bimsha*, destruction of life, be it ever so minute. A votary of *ahimsa* therefore…shuns to the best of his ability the destruction of the tiniest creature, tries to save it, and thus incessantly strives to be free from the deadly coil of *bimsha*.” Whether limited to the human realm or extended beyond it, the principle of life affirmation, although not without its own problems and inconsistencies, offers guidance for human behavior.