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Book review of Empowering Our Military Conscience: Transforming Just War Theory and Military Moral Education

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Abstract

Empowering Our Military Conscience seeks to accomplish two goals. First, it highlights new and often critical perspectives on just war theory. Second, it attempts to discern more practical lessons for both trainee and practising military professionals by assessing the ethical standards of the profession of arms via the lens of just war theorising, and by establishing the implications for Professional Military Ethics Education (PMEE).

Divided into three parts, the first addresses *jus ad bellum* (the propriety of resorting to war), the second *jus in bello* (just conduct within war) and the third *jus ante bellum*, particularly the moral conditioning of military officers via PMEE. The lead chapter is contributed by Michael Walzer, the doyen of contemporary just war theorists whose 1977 work, *Just and Unjust Wars*, remains the classic treatment of the subject. In part the book is structured so that subsequent chapters can challenge or refute some of Walzer's views as the dominant theorist.

Keywords

moral, military, our, war, empowering, education, review, book, just, theory, transforming, conscience

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Empowering Our Military Conscience: Transforming Just War Theory and Military Moral Education by **Roger Wertheimer (ed.)**. Farnham: Ashgate, 2010. 207pp., £55.00, ISBN 978 0 7546 7894 6

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perspectives on just war theory. Second, it attempts to discern more practical lessons for both trainee and practising military professionals by assessing the ethical standards of the profession of arms via the lens of just war theorising, and by establishing the implications for Professional Military Ethics Education (PMEE). Divided into three parts, the first addresses *jus ad bellum* (the propriety of resorting to war), the second *jus in bello* (just conduct within war) and the third *jus ante bellum*, particularly the moral conditioning of military officers via PMEE. The lead chapter is contributed by Michael Walzer, the doyen of contemporary just war theorists whose 1977 work, *Just and Unjust Wars*, remains the classic treatment of the subject. In part the book is structured so that subsequent chapters can challenge or refute some of Walzer's views as the dominant theorist.

All contributors write from their professional perspectives as moral philosophers or applied ethicists. The book makes this explicit by drawing distinctions between the just war perspectives of moral philosophy and international law. Chapters variously cover such topical issues as preventive war, humanitarian intervention and when, or even whether, it can be considered just even unintentionally to kill non-combatants in war. There exists a sub-theme, occasionally explicit, in opposition to the 2003 invasion of Iraq; a leading example of what George Lucas' chapter on preventive war terms 'vigilantism'. Wertheimer's own chapters address the unique, inherent 'moral precariousness' of the military profession, and provide a highly personalised, idiosyncratic account of the importance of transmitting the 'ethos of professionalism' (p. 159) via a sound PMEE programme.

Despite possessing common themes, the chapters do not gel together easily. A particular shortcoming is the exclusivity of philosophical perspectives on just war at the expense of legal and strategic ones. Indeed, moral perspectives derived from strategy are ignored entirely. The middle chapters, in particular, tend towards high levels of abstraction. To be truly relevant to the policy maker or military professional, just war thought must present practicable options for the application of lethal force. Perhaps that is why Walzer remains the gold standard, rather than those hoping to 'transform' the field in line with a more purist standard of moral philosophising. Even Wertheimer recognises that 'abstract moral theorizing is a feckless

enterprise absent a transmission mechanism to influence conduct' (p. 9).

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