



Military Training and Revisionist Just War Theory's Practicability Problem

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Abstract

This article presents an analytic critique of the predominant revisionist theoretical paradigm of just war (henceforth: revisionism). This is accomplished by means of a precise description and explanation of the practicability problem that confronts it, namely that soldiers that revisionism would deem “unjust” are bound to fail to fulfil the duties that revisionism imposes on them, because these duties are overdemanding. The article locates the origin of the practicability problem in revisionism’s overidealized conception of a soldier as an individual rational agent analogous to the aggressor or defender in a case of lethal self-defense, who is capable of reflecting on the morality of his status in war and of the killing he performs and thus of recognizing his revisionist duties. Revisionism, however, ignores the following fact: Killing in war is not a natural human behavior. This is why training soldiers to kill is—and arguably always has been—a necessity for the existence of war and the killing that occurs in it. Moreover, this training involves a certain level of moral desensitization to violence whose goal is to prevent soldiers from thoroughly reflecting on the morality of the killing they engage in. Hence, war and killing can only exist if soldiers are trained in such a way that they do not reflect on whether they could be addressees of revisionist duties in the first place. This means that military training is a “constitutive condition” of soldiers and war, which is why it cannot excuse their noncompliance with revisionist duties, thus making these duties categorically overdemanding. The argument here draws on the paradigmatic example of modern US military killing conditioning (MC), but embeds it into a broader military-historical perspective that describes how soldiers have always needed to be mentally and morally influenced in order to enable war and killing. The article’s explanation of revisionism’s practicability problem has a constructive consequence for future theory-building in the ethics of war: It implies that a potentially revised ethical theory of war must necessarily analyze the institutions that allocate belligerent resources, if it aims to morally assess battlefield behavior in a practicable manner.

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Keywords Revisionist just war theory · Ethics of war · Military training · Military killing conditioning · Military ethics · Ethics of self-defense

1 Introduction

This article presents an analytic critique of the predominant revisionist theoretical paradigm of just war (henceforth: revisionism). This is accomplished by means of a precise description and explanation of the practicability problem that confronts it, namely that soldiers that revisionism would deem “unjust” are bound to fail to fulfil the duties that revisionism imposes on them, because these duties are overdemanding. The article locates the origin of this problem in a disconnect between the revisionist conception of what a soldier is and the condition of real soldiers capable of systematic and repeated (legal) killing in war. For the sake of brevity, the argument focuses on modern military killing conditioning (MC) in the US. However, it places MC into a broader military-historical perspective, highlighting that the existence of war has always required soldiers to be mentally and morally influenced in order to partake in the systematic killing necessary to make war happen. This reality check reveals that revisionism is impracticable for soldiers for two reasons: First, revisionism ignores how MC produces a class of people conditioned not to reflect about their moral status. However, this does not sit well with revisionism’s own understanding of the soldier as an individual, rational, aggressive or defensive agent of which such reflection is required, making revisionist theory conceptually inadequate. Second, MC enables soldiers to systematically and repeatedly kill in war, within the boundaries of the Law of War (LoW), which is, arguably, their defining characteristic. In other words, MC is the cause of the behavior that revisionism is intended to morally judge, and hence of the existence of the individuals to whom revisionism is mainly addressed. Also, as this “constitutive condition” of professional soldiers, MC cannot excuse their noncompliance with the revisionist duties. If it did, then the cause of the behavior that revisionism is designed to address would excuse non-compliance with the duties intended to correct that behavior.

Acknowledging MC, and military training in general, has further consequences for revisionism: MC’s systematic discouragement of soldiers’ moral reflection on killing in war is independent of the justice of their state’s overall war. Hence, in the event that all parties to an armed conflict are militarily conditioned, MC would create moral symmetry on the battlefield, thereby defying the main revisionist upshot of general moral soldier asymmetry in those cases. Furthermore, MC is a characteristic of soldiers that arguably strongly distinguishes them from individual aggressors and defenders in a self-defense case during peace-time. This raises the question whether the moral concept of self-defense, on which the revisionist methodology relies, can provide an adequate basis for a practicable ethical theory of war. The article’s explanation of the practicability problem also indicates that institutions—both present and past—that allocate the physical and mental resources for war, of which MC is just one modern example, should not be ignored by a potentially revised and practicable philosophical theory of war that aims to morally assess battlefield behavior.

Section 2 of the article summarizes the revisionist argument. Section 3 demonstrates how the literature defines revisionism's practicability problem. Section 4 argues that neither of the two commonly proposed solutions to the practicability problem identifies the precise theoretical cause of revisionism's systematic development of overdemanding duties. However, this would be necessary if a revised philosophical theory of war is to avoid reproducing the practicability problem. Section 5 provides the missing analysis by confronting the revisionist account with the conditioning of soldiers. It briefly outlines the history of belligerent killing behavior and soldier training. It then describes MC as practiced in the US military today. This analysis reveals that, generally speaking, wars have arguably always required soldiers to be placed in a state of moral desensitization in order to partake in the killing that makes war possible. More specifically, using the example of MC, the analysis demonstrates that military training achieves this by making soldiers believe that their belligerent acts are "just" irrespective of their state's cause for war, and, second, that soldiers are partly de-individualized because they are conditioned to act as members of a cohesive group. Revisionism, by contrast, presents soldiers as individual, rational, aggressive or defensive agents who are able to properly reflect on and recognize whether the war and killing they are engaged in is just or not. Research on modern military training techniques that are most available in the public domain concerns those practiced in the US, hence this section's focus. However, we have any reason to believe that MC is applied by militaries of other states as well. Section 6 argues that revisionism is impracticable, because in ignoring MC it falls victim to the theoretical category mistake of comparing soldiers to individual aggressors and defenders in self-defense cases during peace-time, although MC conditions soldiers to blend in to a cohesive group. Moreover, given that MC creates the capacity for systematic and repeated legal killing in war and hence the behavior that revisionism is set up to morally judge, MC is a constitutive condition for the existence of modern professional soldiers. This is why MC cannot serve as an excusing condition for soldiers who breach the duties outlined by revisionism. This, in turn, makes the duties identified by revisionism categorically overdemanding, and hence impracticable for modern conditioned soldiers. Section 7 discusses three implications of these claims for revisionism, in particular, and for just war theory more generally. Section 8 discusses revisionism from a broader war-theoretical perspective and explains why the findings of the analysis present an argument for a new conceptualization of war that covers the institutions that create and allocate the resources necessary to fight them. Section 9 concludes the article and places the present argument in a broader military-historical perspective.

2 The Revisionist Argument

Revisionist just war theories aim to explain whether—and if so, why and when—a war, along with the systematic killing it involves, is morally justified. In their search for justifying belligerent harm and death, they rely on the moral concept of self-defense, which serves as a moral justification for acts of harm that are usually impermissible. While, in general, we must not harm other people, it is justifiable

to defend ourselves against unjust attacks by others—sometimes even using lethal force. Hence, as a moral concept, self-defense implies that causing others harm, and even killing them, can sometimes be justified. Self-defense is often understood as a right that is grounded in the right to self-preservation: Humans have a right to life and, hence, to preserve their lives. If our right to life is jeopardized, we may be justified in defending it.¹

The twentieth-century just war theorist Michael Walzer famously argued for the “moral equality” of soldiers:² Soldiers fighting on “both sides” of a war have an equal moral right to kill their adversaries, because the fact that they pose a threat to one another’s lives leads them both to forfeit their right not to be attacked. Hence, all soldiers have a right to defend themselves against their enemies—irrespective of whether their state’s cause for war is just or unjust. Walzer’s line of argument provides a compelling defense of the existing law of war (LoW), because the LoW grants each soldier the same right to kill enemy soldiers.³

Walzer’s perspective—and its legal equivalent LoW—have been subject to intensive scrutiny by a new just war literature called “revisionism.”⁴ Spearheaded by Jeff McMahan, revisionism defends the “moral inequality”, or “asymmetry,” of soldiers, arguing that the right to not be harmed is lost not merely because someone poses a threat to someone else, but because they pose an *unjust* threat.⁵ In ordinary cases of self-defense, if we pose an unjust threat to someone else, we lose the right not to be harmed by the person threatened with attack, i.e. the defender, or anyone else acting on the defender’s behalf. This justifies the defender’s self-defense: she has just cause to use force against the attacker. The attacker, by contrast, has no just cause for using force against the defender. The attacker and the defender are thus morally unequal. Revisionists apply this “moral inequality” between an unjust attacker and a just defender from ordinary life to killing in war. They conclude that since just cause is a necessary condition for the morally permissible use of force, only combatants fighting for a state with a just cause for war (“just soldiers”) have a right to kill their enemies. “Unjust soldiers” fighting for a state without a just cause for war have no right to kill the ‘just.’ This conclusion stands in stark contrast to the current legally symmetric LoW. For if it were enshrined in law, only soldiers fighting on the just side of a war would have the right to kill, whereas the current LoW grants this right to soldiers on both sides.

¹ Coons and Weber 2016.

² Walzer 2006.

³ Article 43 (2) Protocol I. According to Haque 2017: 21–23, soldiers do not have an equal legal right to kill, but are merely immune from criminal prosecution for the killings they commit in light with the Law of War (LoW).

⁴ Revisionist just war theorists reject either one or both pillars of the LoW: Some deny that national defense can justify war. Others argue for a moral “asymmetry of soldiers” and deny that the same rules apply to soldiers of both belligerent parties. On the former, see Rodin 2002. On the latter, see McMahan 2004a, 2006, 2009; Rodin 2008; Frowe 2014; Fabre 2012. The article focuses on the second group of revisionist arguments and refers to its representatives as “revisionists.”

⁵ McMahan 2004a: 25; 2008, Rodin and Shue 2008: 21–22.

3 Revisionism's Practicability Problem

At the most general level, this revisionist “moral inequality” between soldiers amounts to the claim that if your side lacks a just cause, then you are an unjust soldier, and no matter how diligently you seek to follow the rules of combat as set down by the law, your actions will largely be morally condemnable.

What action-guiding duties (henceforth: duties) does revisionism impose on soldiers who are fighting—or who are supposed to fight—for a state pursuing an unjust war? It has been argued that unjust soldiers should refuse to fight, or else simply pretend to fight.⁶ Alternatively, if they are already fighting in an unjust war and realize that this is morally wrong,⁷ they should surrender immediately or else lay down their weapons once back at base.⁸

One problem with these supposed duties noted in the literature is that fulfilling them is usually dangerous. Although recognized by the UN as part of the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief,⁹ conscientious objection to military service invites prosecution and imprisonment in certain countries.¹⁰ Surrendering to the enemy, while protected by the law of war,¹¹ can still be risky. Furthermore, laying down one's weapons at base means disobeying a military order and breaching martial law.¹²

Other theorists argue that if the law of war reflected the revisionist asymmetry by granting only just soldiers a legal right to kill, and if unjust soldiers are penalized for fighting in an unjust war, it would make little sense for the latter, as “unprotected game,” to respect humanitarian restrictions on combat. Rather, unjust combatants would do anything to make their own state win the war, since this would make it more difficult to prosecute and punish them after.¹³ Hence, making the law asymmetric too may also create perverse incentives for unjust soldiers.

In sum, the literature acknowledges that there may exist almost insurmountable motivational constraints preventing unjust soldiers from fulfilling their revisionist duties. Every plausible moral duty is somewhat demanding, because it imposes some moral obligation upon us, sometimes even requiring a compliant agent to sacrifice significant well-being. Demanding duties apply to people, making people their “addressees.” Overdemanding duties, by contrast, surpass the threshold of what can reasonably be expected of people. Hence, they are generally criticized for being impracticable.¹⁴ Satisfying the revisionist duties would require soldiers to overcome

⁶ McMahan 2009: 133–135.

⁷ As Ryan 2011: 34, argues, many soldiers fighting in Vietnam only realized that what they were involved in was unjust once they got there.

⁸ On immediate surrender, see McMahan 2009: 135. On laying down one's weapons once at base, see Lefkowitz 2020: 168.

⁹ HRC A/HRC/24/17.

¹⁰ Whetham 2018.

¹¹ Art. 41 (2) (b) Additional Protocol I.

¹² See e.g. art. 92(1) and (2) US UCMJ.

¹³ McMahan 2008: 30, see also McPherson 2018:147.

¹⁴ Braddock 2013: 169.

the motivational constraints, which would require them to accept an (additional) risk to their lives—a cost so high that no one can reasonably be expected to bear it.¹⁵ Because revisionist duties are overdemanding for soldiers, they are impracticable.

4 Evading the Practicability Problem

Revisionism's practicability problem has been addressed in roughly two ways, both of which seem insufficient:

McMahan himself proposed that if revisionism cannot directly apply to real soldiers and if an asymmetric law of war would cause unjust soldiers to fight without restraint, then the law of war and the morality of war must diverge. The law should simply guide soldiers, such that their acts conform as closely as possible to what the revisionist inequality requires. For McMahan, the existing symmetric law of war fulfils this role sufficiently well.¹⁶

This claim seems problematic, because accepting a divergence between the law and the morality of war means denying systems of moral thought to articulate an unchangeable moral principle practicable in the real world—i.e., a statement of truth or, at least, of justified knowledge. However, moral theories are, arguably, meant to guide action in this world.¹⁷ This is why McMahan's position has been argued to relegate morality to an abstract sphere, being excessively idealistic or even mystical¹⁸—it accepts a largely inoperable moral philosophy as true.

Henry Shue addresses revisionism's practicability problem in a different manner, arguing that “[...] principles that are intended to be action-guiding must be understandable as relevant by those whose actions they are to guide.”¹⁹ However, the revisionist duties cannot be so understood by unjust soldiers, because, as he argues, they believe that they are in the right, as evidenced by their participation in the unjust war. Moreover, since ought implies can, Shue's “solution” to the practicability problem is to reject the theory.²⁰

Shue also asks how revisionism could systematically articulate duties that seem overdemanding for those whose behavior they should guide? He suggests that the answer lies in the fact that revisionism ignores, first, that the scale of wartime violence is incomparable to peacetime violence and, second, that in war, legal rules both allow mass violence and create the individuals who perpetrate it, i.e. the soldiers.²¹ A

¹⁵ There exist different sources of demandingness objections against a philosophical theory. A detailed description of these subgroups of arguments is unnecessary for the article's main argument. For an overview, see Braddock 2013.

¹⁶ McMahan 2008: 22, 33–36. See Haque 2017, Chap. 2.

¹⁷ See e.g. Elster 2011: 44, or Prieto 2022. Prieto raises the argument for practicability directly in relation to moral rules for war.

¹⁸ O'Driscoll 2021: 8 calls revisionism an outright “invention.”

¹⁹ Shue 2016: 426.

²⁰ Shue 2016: 414–415.

²¹ Shue 2016: 416–417.

theory that does not acknowledge these differences is bound to develop unfulfillable duties and must be rejected.

If a moral theory ought to be practicable—as one about such a life-or-death matter as war necessarily should—we cannot accept that its conclusions reside on an abstract plane, inaccessible to those it is intended to guide. Hence, Shue's rejection of revisionism seems reasonable. However, it is crucial to provide a more substantive answer to the question raised above and to analyze the theoretical roots of revisionism's impracticability. This may provide both a more precise explanation for the practicability problem and insights for future theorizing: often, theories are rejected because what they say “just cannot be true,” or, with revisionism, because it asks the impossible, making it necessary to either accept a trade-off between moral requirements and practicality through law²² or to elaborate a new theory from scratch.²³ The latter option risks creating isolated camps of “revisionists” and “skeptics,” potentially resulting in a theoretical stalemate. When it comes to a philosophical theory of a phenomenon as disastrous as war, it is imperative to minimize this risk.

In sum, McMahan's argument for a divergence between law and morality seems like an evasion rather than a solution. By contrast, Shue, despite suggesting that the difficulty facing revisionism lies in its misconception of war, does not go far enough: we need to precisely locate the problematic components of revisionism that generate overdemanding duties for soldiers. Only then can we be certain to avoid reusing these components in a future, potentially revised philosophical theory of war. Section 5 explains which components of a theory determine its practicability, before identifying these components within revisionism and contrasting them with some of their “real-world” correlates – modern professional soldiers in the US.

5 The Source of the Practicability Problem

Generally speaking, a moral theory that is to be practicable must adequately position itself towards the world in which, and the humans through which, its conclusions should apply. “Adequate positioning” means trying to perceive the world and the people in it in such a way that its moral conclusions do not seem foreign, mystical, abstract, or overdemanding to the latter. Hence, a moral theory of war should try to perceive war and soldiers in this light. More explicitly, the practicability of theoretical conclusions is only possible within the space encompassed by the theory's preconditions or conceptions. Philosophical conclusions are meaningful only to the extent that its preconditions hold. One rule may be generally granted: The closer the preconditions are to what one calls “reality,” the more realistic (or practicable) an investigation's results will be. Hence, if the moral asymmetry between soldiers is impracticable, then the revisionist preconditions must encompass a space that does not correspond closely with “reality.” The suggestion is that there must exist a cleavage between the revisionist preconditions and real-world parameters that is so significant that revisionism's moral principles become impracticable. More precisely,

²² McMahan 2008.

²³ O'Driscoll 2021.

revisionist conceptions of soldiers, war, or probably both, diverge from modern professional soldiers. The following subsections will confront revisionism with the reality of being a modern US soldier.

5.1 The Revisionist Soldier at War

5.1.1 Revisionist War

McMahan writes:

“First, imagine a case in which a person uses violence in self-defense; then imagine a case in which two people engage in self-defense against a threat they jointly face. Continue to imagine further cases in which increasing numbers of people act with increasing coordination to defend both themselves and each other against a common threat, or a range of threats they face together. What you are imagining is a spectrum of cases that begins with acts of individual self-defense and [...] eventually reaches cases involving a scale of violence that is constitutive of war.”²⁴

For McMahan, war is a conglomerate of numerous integrated individual acts of aggression and self-defense. He asks the reader to “imagine” war in this way, an understanding that is neither an observation, nor a testable hypothesis. Rather, it is a necessary prerequisite for transposing the moral asymmetry between attacker and defender in ordinary self-defense to military killing: Only if war is understood as individual acts of self-defense can the moral concept of self-defense be used to generate norms for killing in war. Revisionists may object that only individual acts of aggression and self-defense are morally relevant for the question whether killing in war is justified. However, this would be a presumption, not an argument. Furthermore, since self-defense is a moral concept that implies that killing can be just, imagining war in terms of acts of self-defense presupposes that justice can be found in it—which is just war theory’s basic idea. Hence, in revisionism, “war” is construed in terms of those acts which are morally relevant for finding justice in it. None of the other famous revisionists, such as Cécile Fabre or Helen Frowe, provide an explicit definition of war, but they implicitly accept McMahan’s conception by further applying the moral concept of self-defense to killing in war.

5.1.2 The Revisionist Soldier

In revisionism, “war” is an aggregate of individual acts of aggression and defense, and a soldier’s moral status depends on the justice of his state’s cause for war. This is why revisionists understand soldiers fighting for a state without a just cause for war (unjust soldiers) as individual aggressors, and soldiers fighting for a state with a just cause for war (just soldiers) as individual defenders.²⁵ Furthermore, Fabre writes

²⁴ McMahan 2004b.

²⁵ McMahan 2008: 21–22.

(without explaining) that revisionism presumes that the soldier is “a moral and rational agent.”²⁶ Moral philosophy generally assumes that a “moral agent” is an agent capable of making a moral judgment based on some notion of right and wrong.²⁷ On the presumed “rationality” of soldiers, Frowe explains: “[...] it is surely desirable to legislate on the basis of what we would want people to do were they thinking clearly and in possession of the facts. The same is, I think, broadly true of a moral account of permissible killing.”²⁸ That a soldier “thinks clearly and in possession of the facts” could mean that he is equipped with all the information necessary to properly reflect on and formulate an adequate moral judgment in a particular military situation.

McMahan does not explicitly conceptualize the soldier as a rational, moral agent. Still, in arguing for a divergence between law and morality, he implicitly acknowledges that there exists a cleavage between theoretical and real soldiers. Precisely because a real soldier cannot grasp revisionist morality and act accordingly, he should be guided by a roughly symmetric LoW. Haque explicitly states that moral principles abstract from any “epistemic, pragmatic, cognitive, and emotional constraints under which combatants fight.” The law, by contrast, must “address combatants roughly as they are in the circumstances in which they typically find themselves in.”²⁹ Hence, moral theory must not—and revisionism does not—understand soldiers “as they are.”

In sum, the revisionist soldier is a “rational” aggressor or defender, willing and able to reflect on his moral status and behave accordingly, i.e., to reflect on the justice of their state’s war for them to fulfil the revisionist duties for unjust soldiers. Since theoretical conclusions only apply in the space encompassed by the theory’s preconditions, revisionist duties can only be fulfilled by soldiers if those soldiers are rational, moral (unjust) aggressing or (just) defending agents who can and do reflect as described. To understand whether the revisionist conceptions correspond with the modern belligerent reality, the next subsection describes the killing behavior of modern professional soldiers in the US.

5.2 Military Training

In peacetime, large-scale, human, intraspecies killing is mostly absent. Recent research in different disciplines indicates that this is neither a coincidence, nor the result of a fragile institutional balance keeping belligerent human nature in check. Scientific results in archaeology,³⁰ evolutionary biology,³¹ primatology,³² anthropology,³³ or

²⁶ Fabre 2012: 2, italics added.

²⁷ And who can be held accountable for his actions.

²⁸ Frowe 2014: italics added.

²⁹ Haque 2017: 9.

³⁰ Fry 2013: 6–7.

³¹ Hughbank and Grossman 2013.

³² Fry and Souillac 2020, Ferguson and Whitehead 2000, Otterbein 1997, Fry and Szala 2013, Ferguson 2019, Fry 2007, for diverging opinions, see Keely 1996.

³³ Hrdy 2009.

peace systems research³⁴ continue to disprove the classic narrative, at least as old as Greek civilization,³⁵ of human nature as martial, instead arguing that humans have a strong innate resistance to killing other humans.³⁶ Due to this natural inhibition against killing fellow humans, humans do not readily engage in war combat.³⁷ Presenting an internationally accepted refutation of the idea that organized human violence is biologically determined was, e.g., one of the intentions of the Seville Statement on Violence adopted by UNESCO in 1989.³⁸ Hence, no one is born believing things like: “I have to and want to join an organized battle and potentially kill people.” This is why, very simply, many wars in the past were waged in such a way as to avoid too much systematic and repeated killing, soldiers were somehow conditioned to circumvent the natural inhibition against killing, or both.

For instance, leading historians of war describe ineffectual firing throughout history, indicating that “untrained” soldiers will not voluntarily shoot at enemies.³⁹ It is also claimed that, before the introduction of universal conscription, armies formed a rather small fraction of European populations. The reason for this is, in John Keegan’s words, that war was regarded as “[...] too brutal a business for any except those bred by social position or driven to enlist by lack of any social position whatsoever.”⁴⁰ Only those whose peacetime life was largely equivalent to wartime hardship were thought fit for war. Moreover, those peoples who did make every man a warrior before the introduction of universal conscription arguably took great care to fight in such a way that direct or sustained conflict with the enemy was mostly avoided. Furthermore, before universal conscription, average battle-related deaths rarely exceeded 10% of the total number of combatants.⁴¹ It is also argued that much past belligerent killing is purported to have happened in the pursuit phase, so as to avoid facing a lethal enemy at close range, making it easier to deny his humanity, which is said to lower resistance to killing.⁴² In certain countries, the introduction of universal conscription also triggered strong resistance: The New York City “Draft Riots” of 1863 represented one of the largest civil disturbances in American history. Canada and Ireland faced riots after introducing conscription in 1918.⁴³ A strong drop

³⁴ Fry et al. 2021.

³⁵ See e.g. Sahlins 2008.

³⁶ I am grateful to Professor Douglas Fry for verifying the content of this paragraph.

³⁷ Kempes, Sterck and de Castro 2013. See also Ardant du Picq’s observation of French officers in the 1860s and on several battles: “Man does not enter battle to fight, but for victory. He does everything that he can to avoid the first and obtain the second.” See Greely and Cotton 2005.

³⁸ Adams 1991.

³⁹ See e.g. Holmes 1985, Keegan and Holmes 1985. See Griffith 1989 for data on the very low killing rates among American Civil War and Napoleonic regiments; Holmes 1985 on very low Argentinian firing rates in the Falklands War; and Fink 2010 on FBI studies on nonfiring rates among law-enforcement officers between 1950 and 1960.

⁴⁰ Keegan 1994: 442.

⁴¹ Keegan 1994: 442.

⁴² Clausewitz, C. V., 1984, *On War*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Hughbank and Grossman 2013: 499. Keegan 1983 argues that there exists no evidence that, at Waterloo, enemies actually crossed bayonets.

⁴³ Ryan 2018: 289.

in voluntary enlistment in the US following 9/11 can be interpreted as reflecting a similar phenomenon.⁴⁴ Arguably, drafting the entire militarily eligible (male) population exacerbated the problem of desertion. For instance, the very first article in “The Art of Commanding an Army”, a military manual by Frederick the Great who commanded a Prussian army of a size unequaled anywhere in Europe at the time, urges generals to do anything to prevent their soldiers from deserting.⁴⁵

Moreover, given the general natural inhibition towards repeatedly killing in war, fighting wars has, in one way or another, arguably always involved training people to circumvent, or even overcome, this reluctance. Among the techniques used for this, the creation of group cohesion, the requirement of strict obedience to legal orders, and the use of drugs figure prominently. Quite generally, these techniques all aim, in various ways, to make soldiers reflect less about what they are required to do, namely repeatedly and systematically harm adversaries in battle, and to desensitize them to violence.⁴⁶ For example, it has been argued that crew-served weapons have been responsible for the bulk of killing in the past. Opting out of the duty to fire at the enemy is more difficult if obedient comrades are present (see also below). Obedience to professional military leaders who demand that soldiers kill in combat has, in turn, been of paramount importance for effective battle since the Roman period.⁴⁷ The use of drugs in war is also argued to be as old as war itself. Drugs boost courage and morale, enhance group bonding, and help cope with stress, exhaustion, and boredom. For instance, alcohol has been a companion to war for many thousands of years, because of the desensitizing effect of “liquid courage”.⁴⁸ To name another example, it was with the help of the methamphetamine “Pervitin” (or “crystal meth”) that many German soldiers, and a part of the civil population, were able to keep going at the very beginning of WWII, since it vested them with a sense of strength and superiority.⁴⁹ It should be added that a politically induced propensity towards violence among a civilian population—e.g., via propaganda or a politically endorsed sense of collective victimhood—may also both incentivize citizens to enter military training and reduce the need for intensive training once in the army.⁵⁰ Given the present article’s focus on military training, politically induced civil brutalization will not figure in the main argument. It will, however, be taken up again in Sect. 8, which makes the case for an analysis of the broader social ontology of war, as well as in the conclusion.

A rather recent technique for bypassing the human resistance to intraspecies killing is modern military killing conditioning (MC). After a study indicating that only

⁴⁴ Ryan 2011: 35.

⁴⁵ See also Article 1 in Frederick the Great’s “The Art of Commanding an Army,” describing the great task assigned to generals of preventing desertion.

⁴⁶ For a good historical overview of different techniques, see Hughbank and Grossman 2013.

⁴⁷ Hughbank and Grossmann, 2013: 504–505. For a very good description of the social and moral influence of the military structure in pre-WWII Germany, see Theweleit 2019.

⁴⁸ Art. 3 of Frederick the Great’s “The Art of Commanding an Army” urges generals to ensure enough alcohol is provided in order to keep their troops going.

⁴⁹ Andreas 2020 describes the use of drugs throughout the history of warfare. On alcohol and methamphetamine, see Chaps. 1 and 5.

⁵⁰ On propaganda, see e.g. Stanley 2016; on the political-philosophical risks of a collective sense of perceived victimhood, see e.g. Williams 2008.

20% of the Allies' riflemen actually fired in WWII, it was integrated into US military training and led to a 95% firing rate in the Vietnam war.⁵¹ The goal of MC is to lower the resistance to killing in order to create military potency through chances of survival of personnel. MC happens on both the physical and mental levels: Recruits aim at human-shaped targets that fall down when hit, until the mere glimpse of one triggers two immediate gunshots. Innumerable repetitions create an automatic physical response mechanism upon perceiving a human-like target in actual combat.⁵² Advanced computer simulations and physical mock cities recreate battle situations in detail, and even allow multiple recruits to coordinate more complicated missions.⁵³

Mental MC covers a variety of methods whose combination aims at desensitizing soldiers against violence in order to rationalize potential physical killing that they are trained to perform. One may even argue that MC thereby vests recruits with a new mental, or even "moral", identity: First of all, it must be highlighted that recruits are heavily isolated from the outside world, and that the army has the monopoly on everything a recruit needs to survive.⁵⁴ In this setting closed from civilian influence, recruits are then exposed to values and practices that are strongly opposed to those of "modern civilized society". Consider: The modern army is an environment of organized authority, formal regulations, orders, incentives and punishments, and defined by shared expectations and hierarchical, anti-individualistic, possibly authoritarian and even totalitarian values that are said to reflect the idea that there is a constant danger of war and that humans are naturally martial.⁵⁵ Since these values are very distant from peaceful civilian life, a new language helps recruits to internalize them. E.g., the term "warrior" is used throughout training to evoke a "combatant identity." It is this identity "indoctrination" that "initiates cadets into desired cultural norms that reinforce qualities such as power, toughness, dominance, aggressiveness, and competitiveness, resulting in an image of a 'combat, masculine warrior.'"⁵⁶ Further, soldiers are exposed to language that dehumanizes the enemy and at the same time to language that morally neutralizes practices relating to human killing (e.g., "engaging a target" instead of "killing").⁵⁷ Also, one of the key military values of group loyalty is often artificially thickened by cruel bonding rituals, and, especially drill.⁵⁸ Other informal socialization practices are also said to cultivate a form of "hyper-masculinity," an ideal that valorizes "control, power, competition, and pain tolerance."⁵⁹ A further factor can be said to arguably influence soldiers' minds, yet not towards killing, but towards accepting to die: The military is the only social institution that expects and enforces obedience unto death.⁶⁰ The US Uniform Code of Military Justice holds

⁵¹ Marshall 1966. For an overview of the criticisms of Marshall, see Spiller 1988.

⁵² Dobos 2020, ch. 1.

⁵³ On computer simulations, see *ibid.* On mock cities, see Manach and Twiley 2013.

⁵⁴ Shay 1994: 9, 150–151.

⁵⁵ Wolfendale 2007.

⁵⁶ Do and Samuels 2021: 27, cited in Portis and Wolfendale 2021, 26.

⁵⁷ Wolfendale 2007, Dobos 2020, 20.

⁵⁸ Wolfendale 2007, Shay 1994, 6. Conroy 2000.

⁵⁹ Wood and Toppelberg 2017, 624.

⁶⁰ Dobos 2020: 35.

that a soldier who disobeys an order simply because it would jeopardize his life is liable for punishment up to and including execution. Hence, soldiers have no right to self-preserving disobedience, but rather a duty of “sacrificial obedience.”⁶¹

For the sociologist Anthony King, this very mechanism of MC is what creates the modern, “professional soldier,” i.e. a soldier able to render a specialized service, namely “the application and management of violence.”⁶² Importantly, King argues that “being a professional” also means “being honorable” to oneself and to others. Soldiers value themselves and others precisely because they are professionals. Hence, MC is the main driver for military group cohesion: Soldiers commit themselves to the prescribed collective action out of a mutual expectation of professionalism.⁶³

It should be observed that although soldiers are conditioned to engage in systematic and repeated killing, they must perform it, if they do so at all, within the boundaries of the international law of war (LoW), in which they receive training as well. The LoW requires, *inter alia*, that soldiers not harm or kill civilians, wounded or surrendering soldiers, or prisoners of war and that they not make opposing soldiers suffer unnecessarily. Moreover, soldiers have a legal duty to disobey illegal orders.⁶⁴ Hence, they are trained and under an obligation to skillfully navigate the thin border between physical and mental readiness to repeatedly kill and the prohibition on committing war crimes.⁶⁵

It should also be noted that, especially from the military rank of junior non-commissioned officer upwards, soldiers must master immense informational and collective power. Hence, whereas most privates may be said to be largely trained to obey, other soldiers are trained to handle a vast expansion of agency, because they can and must choose courses of action that involve a large number of their subordinates and that will influence the course of battle.⁶⁶

5.3 Theoretical Implications

This subsection presents the implications of military training for revisionist just war theory. Since pre-MC military training mechanisms have not been as carefully examined as MC, given the scope of the article, the following paragraphs refer exclusively to MC. Note, however, that these implications in all probability also apply to the former.

We can make five important observations: First, though it must be highlighted that MC may succeed in different degrees of intensity varying among individuals, it

⁶¹ § 890 art. 90, § 892 art. 92 UCMJ, Dobos 2020, 35.

⁶² King 2013: 221.

⁶³ King 2013: Chap. 10.

⁶⁴ See art. 51 (2) and (6), art. 41 (1), art. 35 (2), and art. 77 (1) Protocol 1 of 1977 Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 1949, respectively.

⁶⁵ It is, however, telling that—at least in the Australian Defence Force Academy—in the span of three years, recruits undertake 205 h of drill and ceremonial training, but only 44 h of character development and 24 h of military law, Stevenson 1996, 13. The number of hours dedicated to the different units of this training seems indicative of their relative importance.

⁶⁶ Bob Underwood, LTD US Army, personal interview, 9 February 2022.

aims to endow humans with the capacity for repeated, systematic intraspecies killing that, arguably, defines a modern professional soldier. Hence, MC is the constitutive condition of a professional soldier. Second, systematic killing behaviour necessarily requires emotional desensitization and detachment from previous civilian identities characterized by honour and respect of human life. This could be understood as analogous, albeit on a different scale, to the training of surgeons, who could not fulfil their role of cutting open other human beings without professional emotional distance from their patients. Third, by de-individualizing soldiers to a degree, MC is the main precondition for military group cohesion.⁶⁷ Fourth, MC covers not only conditioning to kill, but also to die (or at least acceptance). Fifth, through the physical automation and mental rationalization of killing, MC aims to actively discourage soldiers from reflecting about whether this killing could in fact be unjust or wrong.⁶⁸

In sum, revisionism's practicability problem may lie in a doxastic constraint, rather than in a motivational one: soldiers are trained to avoid reflecting on whether they could be unjust soldiers in the revisionist sense. Hence, if revisionist duties are overdemanding for (prospectively) unjust soldiers, it is not because compliance is risky, which is what is argued for in the current literature, but because soldiers cannot recognize that they are those duties' addressees. This insight enables us to explain revisionism's practicability problem.

6 Theoretical Explanation of Revisionism's Impracticability

MC creates an entire class of people whose capacity to reflect on the justice of their acts is systematically impeded, and who are partly de-individualized and de-personalized through group cohesion. This does not correspond with the revisionist picture of an individual soldier capable of moral reflection about the justice of his state's cause and his own acts in war. Thus, in neglecting MC, revisionism falsely conceptualizes the soldier as analogous to an individual involved in a paradigmatic case of ordinary self-defense, who acts on his own, usually independently from systemic mechanisms aimed at making his acts group-dependent. Killing in war is de-individualized and systematized by an institutionalized military context and training mechanism. Revisionism ignores this context, and hence MC, which alone seems to render intelligible the concepts and persons to which it appeals (i.e., belligerent killing and soldiers). Hence, revisionism's conception of the soldier at war is inadequate to the point of resulting in a category mistake: Although soldiers are individual humans, they are military conditioned not to fully act as such anymore, invalidating the revisionist comparison with cases of "ordinary" self-defense.

This analysis substantiates Shue's intuition that violence in war and violence in peace are different phenomena. The analysis so far has shown that these phenomena are extremely different in that violence in war is created by MC, while "ordinary" self-defense during peace is not. Moreover, since MC actively hinders soldiers' capacity to reflect on the morality of their actions, it creates a strong doxastic con-

⁶⁷ King 2013: 295.

⁶⁸ See also, Ryan 2018: 288.

straint on soldiers' recognizing revisionist duties. Hence, MC seems to be both the differentiating factor between war and peace and the reason why revisionist duties are overdemanding for soldiers.

However, a final assessment of MC's explanatory force in relation to the overdemandingness of revisionist duties requires that the following question be answered: could soldiers be excused for not complying with revisionist duties because they are militarily conditioned? It is important to establish whether MC is an excusing circumstance for soldiers, since if an agent is excused for a breach of a moral duty, she commits a moral wrong due to the duty breach, but is not blameworthy.⁶⁹ However, she still remains the *duty's* addressee, because her duty breach remains a moral wrong. Hence, if soldiers were excused for not complying with revisionist duties because they are militarily conditioned, they would remain the addressees of revisionist duties, and revisionism would not face a practicability problem.

McMahan himself has argued that some unjust soldiers could be excused for not complying with the revisionist duties.⁷⁰ He discusses three categories of excuses: first, unjust killings could be excused for reasons of duress: the soldiers may have been conscripted or joined the war because of economic or social circumstances.⁷¹ A diminished capacity for moral agency is a second common excusing condition, covering cases of mental insanity or infancy.⁷² Since the military seeks to screen out candidates with severe mental problems, McMahan judges this category to be irrelevant for soldiers.⁷³ Third, unjust soldiers could be excused because of epistemic limitations: They may not know that the war they are choosing to fight in is unjust,⁷⁴ or they may be aware of its injustice but nevertheless believe that fighting in it is not a moral problem.⁷⁵ Given that at least half of all wars are unjust, and that fighting in an unjust war involves the wrongful killing of just soldiers, McMahan concludes that there is a general duty for potential soldiers to try to overcome those epistemic limitations.⁷⁶

McMahan's discussion of epistemic limitations touches on what we call "MC": he acknowledges that "drill" and "intensive conditioning" are processes that aim to "efface" soldiers' "individuality" and break "their wills."⁷⁷ However, whereas he describes at great length how factual and moral ignorance may lead to wrong choices about enlisting, he dedicates only one paragraph to military "conditioning." Moreover, he does not deduce a parallel duty for soldiers to overcome the epistemic limitation imposed by training.

⁶⁹ Austin 1957: 23, Fletcher 1978: 759, Rodin 2002: 27–28, McMahan 2009: 114–11.

⁷⁰ For McMahan, unjust soldiers can only be partially excused, if ever. Partial excuses are, however, insufficient to make killing them unjustified. McMahan 2009: 186. McMahan 2009, Chap. 3.

⁷¹ McMahan 2009: 116.

⁷² See also Rodin 2002: 95–96.

⁷³ McMahan 2009: 122.

⁷⁴ Note that, for Shue 2016, this suffices for the revisionist duties to be impracticable.

⁷⁵ McMahan 2009: 137.

⁷⁶ McMahan 2009: 185–186.

⁷⁷ McMahan 2009: 119.

The reason why McMahan largely neglects MC may be that MC *cannot* be an excusing condition for soldiers, since the excusing conditions just discussed are circumstances that have no bearing on whether or not a modern professional soldier is a soldier. Soldiers may or may not have been conscripted. They may or may not have known beforehand that the war they fight would be unjust. MC, however, does not allow such a disjunctive possibility, since MC is constitutive of a professional soldier, in that it creates his capacity to systematically apply lethal violence and to blend into a cohesive group. An agent who has not been subjected to MC is no professional soldier.

Thus, MC does not seem to be an excusing circumstance for soldiers, but rather their *constitutive condition*. The modern, professional soldier as an addressee of revisionist duties is defined by his behavior: He is an agent capable of repeated and systematic intraspecies killing in war—precisely the behavior which revisionism is designed to morally judge. By enabling this behavior, MC creates the soldier as revisionism’s putative addressee. Without MC, the revisionist duties would have no addressee. However, in the act of creating the soldier as revisionism’s putative addressee, MC impedes that addressee’s capacity to recognize his revisionist duties. Put differently, MC creates a category of agents whose behavior revisionist duties aim to guide, but aims to damage or even annul their capacity to fulfil those duties. In other words, what makes the duties overdemanding for soldiers simultaneously determines their existence as putative addressees of these duties. If MC represented an excusing condition for modern soldiers, the addressees of the revisionist duties would be excused precisely qua addressees. This is problematic for at least three reasons. First, it would be slightly absurd: why should one develop duties whose addressees by definition cannot fulfill them? Second, the systematic development of duties that are necessarily breached by their addressees, paired with a denial that the latter can ever be responsible for this breach, creates vast theoretical space in which human violence is excused. This risks being instrumentalized in politics and the media for recruitment purposes: the risk to conscience of prospective professional soldiers is smaller if they do not face moral blame for unjust killing. Furthermore, theoretically enlarging the space of presumed excuse at the expense of presumed responsibility minimizes the possibilities for evaluating the necessity of moral care and education. Third, excusing unjust killing by MC means accepting a moderate moral equality between soldiers. This would lead to an inconsistency between the claim that revisionism is practicable and its conclusion that soldiers are morally asymmetric depending on the justice of their state’s overall war. Here, McMahan may push back, claiming that, though unjust soldiers may be excused for killing, they are to blame for their just enemies’ beliefs that they are not excused. This would be sufficient to once again deprive unjust soldiers of the right to not be lethally attacked, thus saving the revisionist argument for soldier asymmetry.⁷⁸ This position was criticized by Lazar, who claimed that unjust soldiers would, if anything, be only blamelessly responsible for their enemies’ false beliefs about their moral status.⁷⁹ This again would make killing unjust soldiers wrong, both recreating a moderate soldier symmetry. However, it leads to the problem of how to

⁷⁸ McMahan 2011.

⁷⁹ Lazar 2010.

reconcile the idea that killing just and unjust soldiers is wrong, but excusable, with a prohibition of killing those civilians whose responsibility for an unjust war is hard to deny, e.g., certain government officials. Lazar's solution here is to justify killing unjust soldiers as the lesser evil: though killing unjust soldiers is wrong, killing civilians is morally worse.⁸⁰ However, the revisionist rights-based approach would thereby become self-defeating.⁸¹

Here, one might ask: does MC make soldiers' capacity for moral deliberation difficult to a degree that allows for an assumption of reduced moral agency?⁸² If so, McMahan's second category of excusing circumstances, i.e., a diminished or non-existing capacity for moral agency, may become relevant. However, this issue boils down to the following question: can humans be conditioned to an extent that eliminates their moral agency? And, if so, does MC do this work? Here, philosophy can only proceed under strict guidance from neuroscientific and neuropsychological expertise if it is not to dissolve into speculation. Since I do not regard myself as capable of interpreting the influence of MC on moral agency, the conceptual argument that MC makes possible systematic intraspecies killing in war and thereby creates a great part of revisionism's addressees must suffice for not regarding them as excused for being military conditioned.

Revisionism's neglect of MC also seems to reflect McMahan's choice of excusing circumstances: conscription, economic and social circumstances, and the manner in which he discusses factual and moral ignorance about the justice of potentially fighting in a war apply (if they ever do) to a soldier "pre-MC," i.e. to a civilian reflecting on whether to enlist. That is, these excusing circumstances may apply to agents who are not (yet) capable of displaying the behavior that is judged by revisionism. Hence, McMahan provides an answer to a question that is certainly important: can civilians be excused for enlisting despite the moral risks? But his revisionist question is a different one: are unjust soldiers excused for killing in war? The conflation of these questions reflects revisionism's arguably misguided analogy between killing in war and "ordinary" self-defense. This, in turn, rests on a theoretical neglect of MC, whose implications are discussed in the next section.

⁸⁰ Lazar 2015.

⁸¹ Talbert 2013: 234, may be supportive of the view that MC cannot excuse unjust soldiers. For him, despite being ignorant that one does wrong, and even if this ignorance is not one's fault, one's actions may still display a 'judgment that some others do not merit consideration'. Hence, the fact that military conditioned unjust soldiers kill may reflect an attitude that their opponents are not to be considered as humans deserving of life. However, the same would hold for just soldiers. Note that Talbert's argument applies to the human within a soldier's role. Hence, it transcends the conceptual argument that focuses on MC as a constitutive condition for soldiers.

⁸² For a discussion on military training and moral agency, see Wolfendale 2008.

7 Further Implications

7.1 The Revisionist Asymmetry

Note that MC and its systematic discouragement of moral reflection are independent of the cause of a state's involvement in a specific war. Hence, in case all parties to a conflict are militarily conditioned, the impracticability of revisionist duties for modern unjust soldiers, which is grounded in revisionism's conceptual deficit of ignoring MC, seems to speak against its conclusion that there always exists a moral asymmetry on the battlefield. Consequently, if a moral theory's ultimate purpose is—as this article claims—to guide action in the real world, the revisionist doctrine of moral asymmetry seems too strong a claim. Note, however, that this discussion does not affect the initial decision whether to enlist for a particular war, because recruits are subjected to MC only afterwards. This question of whether civilians adequately reflect on the moral risks involved in fighting in a particular war is detached from the question of whether “unjust” soldiers can fulfil their revisionist duties on the battlefield. This point will be taken up in Sect. 8.

7.2 The Concept of Self-defense in the Ethics of War

It has been argued that revisionism is conceptually inadequate, because it directly compares soldiers to “ordinary” individuals involved in self-defense, instead of treating them as partly de-individualized and de-personalized soldiers trained to kill. Since a theory's practicability depends on its conceptual adequacy, a practicable ethical theory of war should not conceptualize soldiers as ordinary individuals. Hence, since the moral concept of self-defense morally assesses lethal harm of ordinary individuals in peace-time, this concept may not be the best basis of a practicable ethical theory of killing in war. Also, since the moral concept of self-defense implies that violence can sometimes be just, a practicable theory of war avoiding this concept would not necessarily be able to prejudge the question of war's justice. Given that just war theory does, in fact, presuppose that some wars are just, it would be seriously challenged by the present line of argumentation.

The present argument that the ethics of war should probably not be directly grounded in the concept of individual self-defense is conceptual. It claims that revisionism cannot yield practicable results. However, understanding killing in war in terms of acts of individual self-defense is also normatively problematic, an issue already implicitly raised by Hobbes and Locke: war is the only social practice in which individuals are obliged to renounce their right to self-defense.⁸³ As some argue, the right to self-defense is grounded in the right to self-preservation.⁸⁴ However, effective self-preservation in war would be best served by retreating or by conscientiously objecting to deployment. Soldiers are, however, under a duty to continue fighting alongside their comrades. Furthermore, soldiers have no right to

⁸³ Hobbes 2017 [1651], Chaps. 14 and 21.

⁸⁴ Rodin 2002: 65.

self-preserving disobedience and must obey legal suicidal orders.⁸⁵ If soldiers had a right to self-defense, one may say that “cowardice” would be rational, and “heroism” irrational.⁸⁶ The present analysis adds to this discussion of the normative problem, by explaining that soldiers behave “irrationally” because of military training.

7.3 War Crimes and the Military Chain of Command

If professional soldiers are conditioned to believe that all their fighting and killing is just, do war crimes still exist, given that they constitute a category of belligerent acts the injustice of which soldiers are, as described above, supposed to recognize?⁸⁷ And, if so, who would be responsible for them? A full answer cannot be given here, but this question sheds light on the fact that since war crimes can be and have been committed under orders, it is significant and must be stressed once more that soldiers take orders from superiors, i.e., that the army is hierarchically differentiated along a chain of command. Hence, localizing moral responsibility for killing in war requires an analysis not only of battlefield acts, but of the entire “organization of war.”⁸⁸ Moreover, given that the army also exists during peacetime, such an inquiry transcends the distinction between “war” and “peace.” Hence, in order to pinpoint moral responsibility for belligerent killing, a thorough understanding of war’s social ontology is needed, an understanding that goes beyond a conceptualization of war as individual acts of aggression and defense, and one which may hinge on societal practices present during times we call “peace.” This would necessitate a broader conceptualization of war, a point that will be taken up in the next section.

Revisionists may claim to capture some organizational military structure in their discussion about which acts suffice for the moral status of an unjust soldier to be lowered to the point that he loses his right to not be attacked. Propositions range from minor contributions,⁸⁹ to indirect or joint threats,⁹⁰ to being somewhat “complicit” in the overall state threat.⁹¹ These distinctions are, however, too coarse to adequately reflect the fine-grained hierarchical differentiation within an army.⁹²

8 Revisionism, War, and Theory

McMahan writes: “Unjust wars can occur only if enough people are willing to fight in them. [...] Wars are and have always been initiated in the context of the general and largely unquestioned belief that the moral equality of combatants is true. If this

⁸⁵ See also Locke 2010 [1689], § 139.

⁸⁶ Ryan 1996: 222.

⁸⁷ War crimes are serious violations of customary and treaty LoW that incur individual criminal responsibility under international law.

⁸⁸ See, e.g., HRW 2001 on war crimes committed under orders in Kosovo, McMahan 2009: 127.

⁸⁹ Frowe 2014.

⁹⁰ Haque 2017.

⁹¹ Bazargan-Forward 2013.

⁹² US DoD 2021.

background assumption were to change – if people generally believed that participation in an unjust or morally unjustified war is wrong – that could make a significant practical difference to the practice of war.”⁹³

McMahan’s aspiration is that people’s current belief that fighting an unjust war is morally unproblematic will eventually be replaced by the revisionist morality of war. If this were to be achieved, civilians would be very reluctant to choose to enlist in the army nor would a soldier accept deployment, because everybody would know that the risks of mistakenly entering an unjust war, with its ensuing moral hazards, are very high.⁹⁴ Hence, revisionism’s goal is a world without unjust wars. Unfortunately, revisionism and said aspiration are two different things:

McMahan wishes to eventually influence people’s beliefs about war, but revisionism abstracts from the mechanisms shaping them, since, as shown above, it ignores how military training influences soldiers’ beliefs. The mechanisms influencing civilians’ beliefs—*inter alia*, propaganda, and an incorrect, naturally bellicose understanding of human behavior,⁹⁵ and the long-standing belief that killing in war is not a moral problem even if the war is unjust—were excluded from the core analysis of revisionism’s practicability problem, precisely because their importance becomes fully apparent only when looking at revisionism’s broader aspirations. McMahan’s excusing conditions arguably mostly apply to civilians who have not yet been militarily conditioned. Hence, the neglect of military training does not only seem to be the reason for revisionism’s over-idealized understanding of soldierly killing in terms of civilian self-defense and for the choice of excusing conditions, but also for his belief that revisionism could ever lead to a world without unjust wars.

The crux of the problem is that a theory can hardly instigate social change if it is based on a tacit acceptance of institutional mechanisms that aim to undermine precisely that change. Revisionism over-abstracts from reality to the degree that it suggests that people recognize revisionist principles. Hence, revisionism is simply too conjectural to ever lead to a world without unjust wars. The analysis of military training as the source of revisionism’s practicability problem thereby helps point to the broader theoretical flaw in just war theories, namely their simplistic focus on battlefield behavior and their neglect of the mechanisms that allocate physical and mental resources for war. Staying true to revisionism’s goal of abolishing unjust wars would, therefore, require an expansion of the theoretical understanding of war to include such “war-building” institutions.⁹⁶ This would entail a new conception of war as a condition created and sustained through societal practices that, *inter alia*, aim to reverse or temporarily suspend the natural human inhibition against intraspecies violence. Such a new conception of war would also require a thorough analysis of the mechanisms of earlier forms of military training, which the present article has only briefly touched on, as well as of the political and cultural instruments shaping

⁹³ McMahan 2009: 6–7.

⁹⁴ More broadly, one could say that if everybody was completely unwilling to enlist and accept deployment given the risk of mistakenly fighting for an unjust belligerent cause, then this could potentially eliminate all wars, since there would be no paradigmatic just war needed to stop an unjust war.

⁹⁵ On the Western cultural self-understanding of humans as naturally bellicose, see Sahlins 2008.

⁹⁶ The term “war-building” was coined by Ryan 2018: 291.

the individual and collective minds and morale of the broader populace in relation to organized violence. Such a new conception of war could also invite the localization and identification of causal chains of responsibility leading to belligerent killing.

9 Conclusion

The present article explained why the revisionist action-guiding duties are impracticable for those soldiers whom revisionism would deem “unjust”. It has located the reason for this impracticability in revisionism’s lack of groundedness in human reality. This reality is one in which there is a natural human inhibition towards killing other humans, which military training aims to bypass or overcome via different techniques, whose purpose is to morally desensitize soldiers to violence and thereby minimize their reflections about killing in battle. After a brief historical contextualization of this claim, the article focused on a modern kind of military training, i.e., US MC. It concluded that MC reconstructs soldiers psychologically, and hence morally, by systematically discouraging them from reflecting and recognizing whether they would be “unjust” soldiers in the revisionist sense. It was argued that MC does not excuse these soldiers for not complying with their purported revisionist duties, because MC constitutes them as soldiers and, hence, as revisionism’s very addressees. Furthermore, as MC also aims at de-personalizing and de-individualizing soldiers in order for them to blend into a cohesive military group, the revisionist analogy between an individual aggressor or defender during peace-time and a soldier in war seems conceptually inadequate. This raises doubts whether the moral concept of self-defense that revisionism borrows from peace-time morality provides an adequate basis for a practicable ethical theory of belligerent killing. Furthermore, if an ethical theory of war were to avoid the self-defense concept, and given that this concept implies that some killing can, under some circumstances, be justified, said theory may possibly be required not to pre-judge whether there is some justice to be found in belligerent killing. This, however, would challenge just war theory’s essential rationale.

The present article’s focus on military training also points to the fact that war should not be theoretically reduced to an aggregation of individual acts of aggression and defense, but that war is rather a condition that is created and sustained via social practices, MC being one of them. Only if this broader social ontology of war is considered can an ethical theory of war square with the psychological reality of the agents whose behavior it aims to morally assess, and thereby create practicable expectations for them.

Note that although the article’s critique of revisionism as impracticable draws on modern US MC, its scope is not necessarily limited to MC or to the US—and hence to modern US wars. On the one hand, we have reason to believe that MC is employed by militaries of other states as well. On the other hand, precisely because, from a scientific perspective, war and killing in war are not natural for humans, they are hardly possible without some level of desensitization of soldiers to violence and the suppression of their potential urge to critically scrutinize what they have to do in war. Hence, although the present article did not focus on pre-MC training and conditioning practices in the same depth as it did on MC, there arguably exist rea-

sonable grounds to assume that its critique of revisionism applies to wars and belligerent killing pre-MC as well. This may, then, suggest the following conclusion with respect to revisionism: Given that its main addressees (soldiers) can only ever display the behavior that revisionism is designed to morally judge (i.e., systematic and repeated killing in war), if soldiers are trained not to morally scrutinize their killing and, hence, to reflect whether they could be addressees of revisionist duties, then revisionism has no addressees and has probably *never* had any. Hence, revisionism may be a pacifist theory in disguise, at least in the absence of suitable autonomous weapons systems.⁹⁷ However, this claim still requires past training and conditioning practices to be analyzed in more detail. This again speaks in favor of the careful analysis of “war-building” institutions, both present *and* past. Furthermore, it must be highlighted that military training (and MC) is merely one of a number of broader social mechanisms that desensitize people to violence. A thorough assessment of war-building institutions must, *inter alia*, consider the possibility that the politically and economically induced brutalization of society may lower or potentially annul the necessity of intense training once in the army.

The conclusion that an ethical theory of war must not ignore the psychological and institutional context of the agents it aims to morally judge also points to the necessity to analyze whether the ethical and legal expectations currently already imposed on soldiers by the existing symmetric law of war are equally unrealistic: soldiers are obliged to not commit war crimes though their self-preservation could sometimes be more efficiently served if they did. Hence, whether the existing law of war, and Walzer’s thesis of the moral symmetry of soldiers undergirding it, also squares with the psychological reality of soldiers is a question of equal importance that also requires further analysis.

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⁹⁷ Not revisionist authors.

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