

# Ethics // Spring 2024

## Handout 13

### War and massacre: Nagel

**ABSOLUTISM AND UTILITARIANISM.** Nagel's concern is to explain the different philosophies of absolutism and utilitarianism and their conflicting perspectives on (or intuitions about) warfare. Utilitarianism focusses on the outcome, absolutism focusses on the nature of what you are doing. Nagel announces that we may have sympathy to both 'intuitions'. Yet his overall goal will be to defend absolutism, though with qualifications. In the process he will rather clearly articulate some of the central insights of absolutism (=deontology). 54

At once the question is: what restrictions are there on warfare? Utilitarianism recognises restrictions, especially those related to long-term effects. They sometimes may put effective restrictions on warfare. But Nagel puts these reasons aside. He is interested in other kinds of reasons when 'reasons of utility and interest fail'. So absolutism does not require us to ignore consequences. When there is no absolute ban on either  $\phi$ -ing or  $\psi$ -ing, we should choose between them on the basis of consequences. However, if one of them is permissible by the absolutist's lights while the other is not, then no amount of utility should permit us to perform the latter. 55

*Remark 1.* What if both  $\phi$ -ing and  $\psi$ -ing are impermissible? This is the situation of the 'evil world' addressed by Nagel at the very end of the paper. 56

**THE DOCTRINE OF DOUBLE EFFECT.** Absolutism focusses on the action itself. Hence it is concerned with forbidding actions of a certain kind, and not the results of a certain kind. In the DDE you may have justifiable reasons for causing 'collateral damage': some consequences of your actions may be regrettable, but permissible, if what you deliberately do is something other than causing these consequences. When you bomb a village, your aim may be to root out guerillas, not to kill civilians. If, therefore, civilians are killed, that is not the aim of your action. Hence, according to DDE, you may be justified in bombing the village. 58

But this distinction depends on a particular description of the action. Hence Nagel prefers an 'unanalyzed' distinction between what you *do* to people and what your doing *merely causes* them. 60

Another distinction Nagel insists on is the one between 'avoidance' and 'prevention'. Absolutism requires that I avoid murder (say) at all costs, not that I prevent it at all costs. For if it were the latter, then we could run an utilitarian argument: murder one to prevent murdering many (compare 'Jim and the Indians' considered earlier on). 61

**TWO COMMENTS ON ABSOLUTISM.** Absolutism, Nagel argues, does not entail moral self-indulgence. It is not about the protection of one's purity. In the first place, if an act were to stain one's purity, there is already something wrong with this act. Absolutism asks what it is that makes the act wrong. Secondly, if one were justified in protecting one's moral integrity by performing a 'sacrifice', then in fact one would be protecting it: one would be doing what morally is right. 62

*Remark 2 (Integrity).* Evaluate Nagel's last argument. Can integrity be violated when you perform a morally right action? 63

Absolutism, Nagel says, is only one version of deontology. There can be a form of deontology that imposes a threshold restriction on permissible actions. For example, a certain number of innocents may be killed in the pursuit of a worthy end, but not an extremely large number of them. But then the choice between this kind of deontology and utilitarianism, at least when the numbers are close, becomes rather arbitrary. 64

**ABSOLUTISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS.** Absolutism, Nagel claims, imposes restrictions on permissible warfare along two dimensions: the addressee of the attack (or any other act of warfare) and the manner of these actions. These acts must be directed at the agent of harm, and they must target his 'harmfulness', his harmful actions specifically, rather than, e.g., the enabling conditions of that harm. 65

That second restriction entails, so Nagel, the idea that we must target the harmful agent *as* a subject. They cannot treat him 'anonymously', as an element of a 'bureaucratic operation'. Hence, any legitimate act of warfare must be done in the form of a 'direct interpersonal response'. 66