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Assessing the Importance of Maintaining Soldiers’ Moral Responsibility—Possible Trade-Offs

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Jessica Wolfendale (2008) argues that maintaining soldiers’ capacity for moral responsibility is especially important. She says: “Good military personnel cannot be mere automatons carrying orders; they must be responsible moral agents who are capable of assessing the morality of their orders and, if necessary, disobeying them.” (28). I do not disagree. Various reasons could be given to justify this claim. For instance, morally responsible soldiers are more likely to do the right thing. Wolfendale then argues that performance-enhancing technologies, whether drugs or devices, should not be used if they would undermine the capacity for moral responsibility of military personnel. The value of such enhancements, even if they make it more likely that soldiers would commit less crimes and suffer less psychologically, can hardly ever outweigh the loss of moral responsibility (28). Here I disagree. Important as it is, the value of moral responsibility might be outweighed by other values.

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE REALM OF DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

Let us consider the value of moral responsibility within a theory of justice. Proponents of luck egalitarianism suggest that within the realm of distributive justice, moral responsibility has an overriding value (Cohen 1989). Their view suggests that individuals are entitled only to those assets that were brought about by their choices, luck should not determine entitlement. For instance, those who suffer misfortunes due to circumstances beyond their control should not be held responsible for the ensuing bad outcomes. Indeed, they should be compensated. Those that enjoy advantages due to good luck are not entitled to those advantages. Such advantages could be justifiably redistributed. The luck egalitarian account suggests that when one is morally responsible for one’s advantages, these ought not to be taken away. In contrast, disadvantages that result from one’s choices are morally acceptable (Dworkin 2000).

This view has been applied to a range of cases, including healthcare (Wikler 2005). For instance, some argue that smokers who develop lung cancer due to their voluntary, yet imprudent behavior, are responsible for their condition. What follows from that claim is contested. Some claim that smokers should bear the costs of their treatment. But smokers who cannot bear those costs present a difficult case. According to one view consistent with this approach, people who cannot bear the costs of their imprudent behavior should be left to fend for themselves whatever the consequences of that might be. Such an outcome might be harsh, but it is on this view, not unjust.

The harshness of luck egalitarianism has led several recent theorists to reconsider the force of moral responsibility within liberal theory, and perhaps more generally. Such examples indicate that we ought to balance moral responsibility with other values (Anderson 1999). For example, the duty of rescue or values such as accommodation, compassion and solidarity might need to be balanced against moral responsibility (Shiffrin 2000; Segall 2007). Holding people responsible for their choices is a good, but not an unalloyed good.

To this point I have argued that moral responsibility could be outweighed by other values. To be fair, Wolfendale (2008) is interested in cases in which the capacity for moral responsibility of soldiers is undermined. She argues that in this case, even significant benefits that result from enhancements cannot outweigh the disvalue incurred by the loss of the capacity for moral responsibility (Wolfendale 2008, 28). In the case I considered, moral responsibility of imprudent individuals is outweighed by other values. Nonetheless, I will argue that, as the smokers’ example suggests, in some cases maintaining the moral responsibility of soldiers would have implications that we ought to consider. Indeed, in those cases enhancing soldiers could have benefits that outweigh the loss in moral responsibility.

OUTWEIGHING MORAL RESPONSIBILITY: THREE CASES

There might be cases in which achieving a particularly valuable goal could best be brought about by undermining the capacity for moral responsibility. Three kinds of cases might be helpful in illustrating this possibility. First, there are cases in which the best way to defeat an enemy and thereby...
preserve a society is by enhancing soldiers in a way that temporarily undermines their moral responsibility. By “temporary” I mean that their capacity for moral responsibility would be restored when the enhancement interventions cease (genetic interventions are thus ruled out). In this scenario the goal of self-preservation of a particular society could be important enough to justify the loss in moral responsibility of its soldiers. To be sure, before using such enhancements, we should be absolutely certain that self-preservation of a society is at stake, and that enhancements are necessary for achieving that aim.

In a second case, enhancing soldiers while undermining moral responsibility might be an effective way to deter potential enemies. By enhancing soldiers we can issue a more credible threat to our enemies, thereby preventing potential conflicts. Soldiers need not be enhanced constantly; rather, they may be enhanced when the need arises. Thus, only enhancement interventions that can be readily taken would be used, genetic enhancements would not be included. When asked to act, these soldiers would be especially effective. Enemies acknowledging the credibility of the threat would be deterred. In this case the capacity for moral responsibility would not be actually undermined. Deterrence, and therefore the prevention of war, might then be invoked to justify the development and use of these enhancements.

What if the deterrence does not work and the enemy launches an attack? It is not clear that it would then be permissible to employ the enhancements, since their deterrent function would already have failed. However, maintaining the future credibility of the deterrence strategy may justify their use. If the use of enhancements as deterrence would significantly reduce the probability of future conflicts, then using them might be defensible.

A third case is one in which we expect the enemy to use cruel tactics, and in which enhancing soldiers would be the best way to preserve their psychological integrity. It might be that un-enhanced soldiers could defeat such an enemy. But they would be exposed to brutality and would suffer psychologically. It could be predicted that in such cases some un-enhanced soldiers will permanently lose their capacity for moral responsibility and others will suffer temporary harm. According to various studies, the percentages of combat soldiers that are harmed psychologically are high (Milliken et al. 2007). Soldiers returning from Iraq exhibited signs of posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, major depression and other mental health problems. The number of soldiers committing suicide is also considerable (Priest 2008).

Given such data, it is not clear that maintaining moral responsibility and the reactive emotions, with which it is associated, would always outweigh the benefits brought about by enhancements. Following Wolfendale (2008), if we are principally concerned with consequences, it could be that in some cases, enhancing soldiers would bring about outcomes that are preferable to those generated by un-enhanced soldiers. This will largely depend on weighing the likely benefits and damages caused by enhancements with those that would be brought about by the un-enhanced. It is likely that the un-enhanced would usually produce better results, yet not necessarily always.

CONCLUSION

Maintaining the viability of the capacity for moral responsibility is important. This capacity should be instilled in soldiers and then constantly nurtured. Soldiers should be able to reflect on the military assignments they are being sent to perform. They should be able to judge them and decide whether or not they are permissible. Nonetheless, I have argued that in some cases enhancements that would temporarily undermine their capacity for moral responsibility could have benefits that outweigh the costs. Thus, a blanket prohibition on enhancing soldiers should not be issued. However, the case of responsibility for soldiers’ actions would not go away. Rather, when soldiers’ capacity for moral responsibility is undermined by enhancements, the responsibility for their conduct will fall even more heavily on those who send them into battle.

REFERENCES


