

‘Humane Warfare is a Contradiction in Terms.’ Discuss

Written by Piangtawan Phanprasit

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As the term ‘humane warfare’ is evidently coined from the words humane and warfare, the statement on whether humane warfare is a contradiction in terms, therefore, requires an investigation into how the terminology is derived in the first place. Nevertheless, to conclude that humane warfare is a contradiction in terms on the basis that the word humane yields a positive sense whereas warfare is suggestive of having adversarial sense is too shallow and semantic. The task in this essay is to identify the concept[1] of humane warfare by assessing whether it is contradictory to apply humanity into warfare, which means in its strictest sense the actual act of making war. Since warfare is inextricably linked to the broader framework of war in general, the assessment of the term humane warfare cannot be done in isolation from the latter. The essay will attempt to argue that the term humane warfare is definitely and always a contradiction. In so doing, the arguments will be evaluated by encompassing sectors and levels of analysis apart from the military and the ethical, and also discussing the statement in question with relation to the nature and character of war in general.

First and foremost, before addressing if the attempt to humanise warfare is plausible, it is a requisite to distinguish between the nature and character of war. While the character of war changes and renders each war unique in accordance with what Clausewitz termed ‘frictions’[2], he maintains that the nature of war is immutable. The distinction between the two concepts resonates in humane warfare since it is questionable whether the effort to make war, if not more, humane is to alter either the nature or the character of war. Either, however, is possible. Humane warfare is not a contradiction in terms if and only if the nature of war is successfully rendered the opposite of cruelty i.e. that the warfare is fought on humanitarian grounds, with humanitarian cause and by humane acts of fighting. In this sense, the scope of humane warfare is extended beyond the mere act of fighting on battlefield but is inclusive of the act of waging war, actual fighting and prospect consequences. Therefore, humane warfare can refer to the conduct of war between states and the act of committing to humanitarian intervention in much the same way. Moreover, it is concerned with the upholding of ethical and moral issues in the international community which are universal human rights[3]. When the international society recognises the principal feature of significantly reducing the incivility of war[4] and humane warfare becomes a norm, seeing limited rather than total war and just war rather than unjust war, only then does the term humane warfare beautifully represent the nexus of humanity, war and warfare.

The transition of the feature of the nature of war from cruelty to humanity, nonetheless, is not impossible. The humanisation of warfare emerged as a postmodernist response towards the horror of modern war which saw annihilation of cities and civilians on an unprecedented scale and was exemplified by the two World Wars. As warfare is primarily about strategy and tactics, perhaps this can be explained by Luttwak’s paradoxical logic of strategy.[5] Mass destruction has prompted the willingness to embrace humanity and prioritise the individual in various ways. The desire to avoid destruction on a massive scale produces revolution in sophisticated warfare technology to replace ground troops to minimise casualties on own side vis-à-vis the other side and to compel the enemy to succumb to their will. Similarly, it has produced the issue of humanitarian intervention whereby the intention to wage war is done on humanistic grounds. On this account, therefore, it would seem that humane warfare is not contradictory but even progressive in its own terms.

On the other hand, humane warfare is created to lay down the discourse for the international society with regard to the conduct of war. In order for the international society to be committed to humane warfare it requires general acceptance to wage and make war humanely. Yet this is not the case in the postmodern world overwhelmed by the

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fear of and insecurity from terrorism and asymmetrical warfare. Warfare is an outward expression of the broader context of war which in itself is a complex activity ranging from the military, economic, political and social sectors of analysis. At a deeper level war and warfare play with the conception of human nature and character which cannot be predicted. The reason for the contradictory sense of humane warfare is that cruelty and ugliness cannot be abolished in the conduct of war. Victory may be proclaimed on the grounds that the casualties are small in number, as in the case of Kosovo whereby NATO was successful in exploiting the first humanitarian intervention to force the step-down of Milosevic, but they won 'ugly'.^[6] The use of force remains preponderant and there is no guarantee for reciprocal abstention from inhumane fight. Equally, it is an absurdity to broadcast the exercise of humane warfare and to expect in return the actual humane fight. In this respect in both theoretical and practical analysis humane warfare cannot possibly change the nature of war.

There then follows the discussion on humane warfare as a feature in the character of war. Even more radical than the aforementioned arguments is the assertion that there is no place for morality in the actual conduct of war in the international society. Although assuming that there is no single casualty in the combat and that victory and defeat are clear-cut, the sense of defeat affects the vanquished detrimentally. The term humane warfare is applicable only when it is treated with the strictest sense that being humane refers to the physical treatment of the person, neglecting the mental element of life. The idea covers the purposes, actual fighting and consequences of making war. The principle of humane warfare is not plausible even if the intention is done on humanitarian grounds. This is because the strategic and tactical elements of warfare as well as their subordinate dimensions like culture, ethics and geography are not deterministic but rather nonlinear. To investigate further into this nonlinearity leads to further discussion on the psychological factor. The cause may be termed as humanitarian but the chain between the purpose of fighting, the actual fighting and consequences sees the chaotic disproportion between input and output.^[7] This refers to the law of unintended consequences and chaos theory, and this is where Euro-centricism kicks in. Humane warfare is predicated on the European conception and generalisation of human being that the individual is increasingly becoming significant. Nevertheless, this cannot explain why a suicide bomber chooses to sacrifice one's own life for killing a handful of the enemy. The inhuman instincts of the man driven by instinctive forces who needs war to experience his own humanity^[8] is, therefore, not becoming anachronistic. On this account, the effort to replace ground troops with automated technology only highlights the desire for preservation of own troops and minimisation of own casualties relative to the enemy, not the concern for minimising the casualties on the enemy's side. Once combat starts, ethics and morality are subsidiary to the desire for victory and avoidance of defeat. In much the same way, the argument for the replacement of total war by spectator-sport warfare that is localized in its conduct and impact^[9] is founded upon a shaky ground. To establish the concept of humane warfare is like to impose a generalised code of conduct from heaven on human beings who respond to multidimensional factors which in turn are not always and necessarily conducive to conforming to such code. Even when humane warfare is regarded as an attempt to alter the character of war to reduce the human factor, it stills sees the combat and not the avoidance of war altogether.

The essay has argued that humane warfare as a concept is contradictory in its own terms. Nevertheless, it is worth assessing the terms in a relativist approach. The existence of the concept of humane warfare, either on its own or with relation to war at large is a contradiction because humanity, despite the desire and willingness to incorporate concern for humanism, cannot successfully be applied to warfare. Yet it is still possible to compare combats as to which one is more, or less, humane than the other. The criteria must be different and needs further investigation. The point is that the extent of humane warfare exists as a standard for evaluating combats, but the existence of term itself is an abstraction. In the final analysis, the concept of humane warfare disregards the decision-making body in the conduct of war and therefore it neglects the element of force that could make the conduct of humane warfare possible and sustainable. Rather, the concept is the generalisation of human rights as universalism in warfare which is specific and unique. Hence, the terms humane warfare represents a paradoxical contradiction used as the Western infatuation to provide the fig leaf to cover for the true ugliness of war. To call for humane warfare is similar to attempt to keep the wave upon the sand. The application of humanity element into the conduct of war and warfare seems possible and probable, but humane warfare is indeed a contradiction in both its own terms and in its practicality.

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