

Environmental Security and Just Causes for War

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1. Introduction

This paper concerns justice of war. However, we will concentrate only on the issue of what can be *just causes* of war, instead of evaluating the entire justification of war. In other words, we will limit our discussion to the question concerning just *cause* and leave aside more general questions concerning justness and moral permissibility of war. Obviously, a war can be unjust and morally questionable even if it has a just cause. For instance, a war that involves unnecessary use of power is probably unjust, even if it had a just cause.

The topic here is so-called environmental wars, and especially the question: would a country that suffers from huge environmental problems *caused by another country* have a just cause for a defensive war? Danish philosopher Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen has argued that under certain conditions *extreme poverty* may give a just cause for a country to defensive war, if that poverty is caused by other countries.¹ So, why could not victims of environmental problems have a similar right to self-defense, given that victims of extreme poverty could have such right?

Suppose that a country unjustly attacks another country by means of biological weapons. In that case, we would probably say that the country that has been attacked has a just cause for a defensive war. Similarly, if a country or a group of countries unjustly attacks another country or a group of countries by means of "environmental weapons" – by intentionally causing environmental catastrophe – it is likely that in our view the countries that have been attacked have a just cause for a defensive war.²

Suppose, however, that a group of countries causes huge environmental problems with hundreds of casualties to a group of countries *unintentionally*, as a side effect of the aim of industrial and economic growth. Would the countries that suffer the consequences of such aim have a just cause for a defensive war in that case?

Most of us tend to think that they would *not* have a just cause for a defensive war – after all, they would not be under military attack. But the issue is not entirely clear. Why would not the countries have a just cause for a defensive war if the consequences of other countries' actions were exactly the same as the consequences that would occur if the other countries used "environmental weapons"? In our view, the question is sensible, although it is certainly rather theoretical. (But this how philosophy is often done!)

In our presentation, we will very briefly analyze this problem and *list the questions* that must be made and settled if defensive war in the case of huge environmental problems is said to have a just cause. We are mainly interested in the right questions. Unfortunately, providing right answers would be a much harder task.

2. The Question of Liability

It is often accepted that a country has a just cause for using military force only if the target country is *liable to be warred upon* and there is a sufficient reason to use military force. What kinds of reasons are "sufficient" is certainly a complicated question, but the question of liability is often even harder. When a target country is liable to be warred upon? What should a "country" do in order to make itself liable to military action? To say that a country is liable does not necessarily mean that it *deserves* to be attacked. Indeed, some people like American philosopher Jeff McMahan argues that an agent can be liable even if it is not culpable, i.e., even if it has not done anything bad intentionally.³

Possibly, an agent can be morally responsible simply because the agent takes seemingly innocent risks. A person who does not carefully check the condition of the roof of his house because the roof seems to be in a very good shape, may be, in some sense, *causally responsible*, if a stone drops from the roof and someone dies. Perhaps the agent is also

morally responsible of the death. If so, then moral responsibility does not require very much.

Suppose now that minimal moral responsibility is sufficient for liability. If this interpretation of the concept of liability is accepted, then it can be argued that countries that cause huge environmental problems for other countries could be liable to be warred upon – even if those countries harm other countries without any bad intentions or without being somehow negligent.

3. The Question of Collective Responsibility

When people say that a “country” is liable, *whose* liability it is that makes the country liable? *Whose* actions count as country’s actions? There are several options: citizens, soldiers, politicians, government, business leaders, individual stake holders, and so on. A related question is what they, say business leaders, should do in order to be culpable or morally responsible so that their actions create liability. It would certainly be a very strange to argue that merely owning a business company that pollutes other countries creates so serious responsibility that it makes the country in which the company acts liable to be warred upon. A separate problem is that it is often very hard to say who owns this and that company. They are owned by investment fund enterprises that have hundreds or even thousands of owners, and those companies act in the international markets.

If a country is ever liable to be warred upon because it unintentionally causes huge environmental problems to another country, then it is likely that the state (i.e. the government) should be somehow involved in the harmful action. Would it make sense to say that merely *allowing* harmful industry is sufficient to cause moral responsibility and also liability? Perhaps, but the issue is not clear. The government *should certainly know* that there is a great chance that their industry may cause problems in other countries. After all, it is commonly known that environmental problems do not respect state boundaries. On the other hand, however, how could the government’s permissive action make the whole country, including individual citizens, liable to military action? That would be a strange implication again. If the government is democratic, then “individual citizens” as voters undoubtedly *are* involved in the government’s decisions. Also, the citizens of rich and

polluting countries benefit from the permissive decisions of their governments. But is that enough for the conclusion that the whole country is liable to be warred upon?⁴

4. The Question of the Scale of Damage and Number of Casualties

Let us go back to the issue of what are “sufficient” reasons for war. It is not very difficult to name clear cases. Massive and aggressive military attack would certainly give a just cause for a defensive war. On the other, military attack in order to gain few economic benefits would not be a just cause for war. But the case of environmental wars is complicated. We should ask how extensive and massive environmental damage and how many casualties would justify “defensive attack” against a country or countries who cause the damage and casualties. This is not a minor question. At the moment, rich countries and their industry do cause massive damage in many countries, and there *are* many casualties, victims of pollution. (Think Africa: people die because they cannot live anymore in their home countries and traditional living areas.) It is easy to imagine that many people would say that the situation *right now* is so bad that it would provide a just cause for an environmental war.

5. Concluding Remarks

We have argued that from a theoretical point of view it is interesting whether so-called environmental wars could have a just cause. By “environmental wars” we have referred to wars that are started in order to prevent serious environmental damages caused by another country or countries. We would like to stress that the topic of this paper has not been the question whether such environmental wars would have an overall moral justification. It is quite clear that such wars would be completely unacceptable: they would cause terrible amount of suffering and casualties; they would not have much chances of success; they would probably spoil environment even more; they would not be the last resort to solve the relevant problems; and so on.

We pointed out that there are three questions that are most important in this context. They are the question concerning liability, the question of collective responsibility, and the

question whether environmental harms may create a “sufficient reason” for raising a war (and exactly when it may if it may).

We would like to end our discussion by saying a couple of words about the concept of “environmental security” which appears in the title of our presentation. Nowadays it is common that national security policies also include issues that concern possible environmental hazards.⁵ It is commonly known that the environment is a highly transnational issue, and that national security is an important part of environmental questions.⁶ Preventing environment based military conflicts is a crucial part of environmental security, but preventing them may mean that more general issues of global resource distribution and “burden distribution” are raised.⁷ In their strategic planning, politicians and military leaders always take into account the threats that environmental problems may create.⁸ The probability of occurrence of environmental wars in the sense we have used that concept may be low, but it would be overly optimistic to think that they are extremely unlikely. On the contrary, in our view, those wars are likely enough to justify a philosophical exploration of the topic.

References

¹ Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, "Global Injustice and Redistributive Wars", *Law, Ethics and Philosophy* 1 (2013), 65-86.

² About so-called environmental weapons, see e.g. Jacob Darwin Hamblin, *Arming Mother Nature* (Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013).

³ Jeff McMahan, "Just Cause for War", *Ethics & International Affairs* 19 (2005), 1-21, esp. 8. McMahan argues: "To say that a person is liable to be harmed even though he does not deserve to be harmed is just to say that if it is unavoidable that someone must be harmed, there is reason that he should be the one who is harmed and that he will not be wronged by being harmed."

⁴ An interesting question is what would be the justified targets of "environmental wars". Only military targets or also industry that actually causes all the casualties. About the acceptable targets of war, see e.g. F.M. Kamm, *The Moral Target: Aiming at Right Conduct in War and Other Conflicts* (Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012).

⁵ See e.g. document "Sustainable Development in Finland's Foreign Policy".
<http://formin.finland.fi/public/default.aspx?contentid=67419&contentlan=2&culture=en-US>

⁶ See e.g. http://www.envirosecurity.org/activities/What_is_Environmental_Security.pdf

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See e.g. <http://envirosecurity.org/news/single.php?id=365>