

What might war tell us about ethics?

Introduction

In this talk, to illuminate the ethics of war under extreme circumstances, I'm going to be talking about 3 exceptional German people, who during the second world war, joined the German resistance to Hitler. Claus von Stauffenberg and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, were linked through a resistance group based out of Berlin and the Abwehr, the German military Intelligence Service. Sophie Scholl, was part of a non-violent resistance group based in Munich called the White Rose. It's appropriate to start this talk with an aphorism from the 19th century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche said that he aimed to say more in one sentence than other philosophers say in whole books. The following aphorism is particularly rich:

Nietzsche slide

"That which is done out of love always takes place beyond good and evil."

This aphorism captures my central philosophical thesis for this talk: that we can recognise what is good even though we cannot make full sense of it. Friedrich Nietzsche thought that there was no ground for ethics and that the morality of a given people is no more than the voice of their will to power. In other words he taught moral relativism and that ethics is a social construction. This aphorism therefore invites the question "Then Friedrich, how do you know what love is?" Nietzsche obviously believed in love and thought it was real. Amazingly, this was in agreement with his antipode Kierkegaard, who said that we cannot get beyond love. In other words, we cannot come up with a theory for it. This is my position. Ethics is real not ideal. This accounts for the force of the 'magical must' of ethics but also why we cannot find an adequate overall theory of ethics. So we cannot make full sense of ethics but we can nevertheless recognise goodness and virtue when we see it. Platonism is false, reason cannot ascend to the form of the good. If it could then ethics would be like mathematics and we'd all agree about it.

Types of War Slide

I suggest that there are broadly 4 scenarios during war which increase in severity: limited war, total war, civil war, internal resistance in war to a wicked regime. The just war doctrine is mostly relevant to limited war. For all 4 types of war the moral component of fighting power is highly relevant. In internal resistance to a wicked regime the most fundamental ethical norms break down. As an ethical realist I maintain that ethics still operates even here though we cannot find an overall theory. Perhaps virtue ethics comes closest to helping us see why the actions of individuals during war are virtuous. But this too does not seem adequate as an overall theory of ethics. I must say, I was a bit disappointed that no Kantians or utilitarians stepped forward to give a talk, but am sceptical that these theories can cope with war. Please challenge me in the questions if you disagree. My position offers an alternative to the one offered by Peter Lloyd which is, at face value, plausible. Wittgenstein said "Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural." Wittgenstein thought that ethics is either nothing or supernatural. Peter has gone for the first option, I've gone for the second. Wittgenstein sits between Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, on the fence.

If you are an ethical realist, then ethics becomes practical. From this position, the closest we can come to surveying the absolute in ethics is to consider exemplars. The 3 people I have chosen to talk about are exemplars of extraordinary people under extraordinary circumstances during the most extreme kind of war, where they felt compelled to resist a wicked regime. But before I start, I want to emphasise that I think that being a good person involves struggling with dilemmas. Sometimes it is hard to even recognise the difference between good and evil. In my deliberations and reading, which has included Dante and Shakespeare, I've come to view Julius Caesar and Adolf Hitler as exemplars who are antipodes in the political and military sphere. One is good and noble, and the other wicked.

But at face value it is hard to tell the difference. They were both conquerors. I haven't got space to explain this, but just wanted to point out that being an ethical person involves struggle and risk.

So let's take a look at my three exemplars, starting with Claus von Stauffenberg.

Stauffenberg intro slide

Claus von Stauffenberg

- Born 15 November 1907
- Died 21 July 1944 (aged 36)
- Profession: Army Officer
- Army Rank: Colonel
- Aristocratic Rank: Count

Stauffenberg picture slide

Here is Count Claus von Stauffenberg

Claus and Nina picture slide

Here is Claus with his wife Nina. They had 5 children together.

Stauffenberg quote slide

- "The Fuhrer's promises of peace and prosperity have fallen by the wayside leaving in their wake a path of destruction. The outrages committed by Hitler's SS are a stain on the honor of the German Army. There is widespread disgust in the officer corps toward the crimes committed by the Nazis, the murder of civilians, the torture and starvation of prisoners, the mass execution of Jews. My duty as an officer is no longer to save my country, but to save human lives. I cannot find one general in a position to confront Hitler with the courage to do it." – Claus von Stauffenberg

Stauffenberg second quote slide

"I am committing high treason with all my might and means..."

Picture of Stauffenberg with Hitler

Here is Stauffenberg on the far left with Adolf Hitler at the Wolf's Lair in east Prussia.

Stauffenberg was known in the Army for his first class physical and moral courage. He felt that he couldn't order a subordinate to do something he was not prepared to do himself. He was a rising star who had had personal access to Hitler and would regularly visit Hitler at the Wolf's lair in East Prussia. He was based at the Wehrmacht High Command in Berlin, but would regularly travel by aircraft to brief Hitler. He considered that the Generals had failed and that rather than ask a subordinate to kill Hitler he must do it himself. In the end, Stauffenberg came to see killing Hitler as his sacred duty.

Initially, Stauffenberg was greatly troubled by the prospect of committing murder and high treason. He was also deeply worried that he might become like the traitor Brutus in the Shakespeare play *Julius Caesar* – which he owned a copy of. In his copy he had underlined "Et tu Brutus", Julius Caesar's last words to the traitor Brutus, when he was murdered outside the Roman Senate. Stauffenberg was a Roman Catholic and he asked a priest if a man could ever be absolved for murder. He was told that only the pope could grant this.

Nevertheless, Stauffenberg tried to blow up Hitler with a bomb and lead a military coup using the Reserve Army in Berlin, for which he was deputy commander. The plans for the Coup were called operation Valkerie. The plan was to announce that there was a Nazi plot to kill

and replace Hitler. The Reserve Army would then be used to arrest senior Nazis and to disarm the SS. Germany would then be delivered into the hands of the Army.

Picture of blast

Here is a picture of the aftermath of the blast which killed 4 people.

Picture of trousers

Here is picture of the trousers that Hitler was wearing. The plot nearly succeeded.

Picture of Major Remer

An excellent film has been made about the plot called *The Plot to Kill Hitler*. This is a screenshot of Major Remer and a detachment of the Reserve Army arriving before The Reichsminister for public enlightenment and propaganda Dr Josef Goebbels to place him under arrest. The plot unravelled when Hitler did not die. Dr Goebbels calmly told Remer that Hitler was not dead. When asked for proof, Goebbels telephoned the Wolf's lair and asked for Adolf Hitler. Hitler came on the line and spoke to Remer ordering him to put down the Coup. Remer did this with ruthless efficiency and was promoted 2 ranks to full Colonel by Adolf Hitler that day.

Picture of memorial stone

Staffenberg was shot by firing squad along with several others that same day in Berlin by his boss General Fromm who was trying to cover up his involvement with the plot.

Stauffenberg's last words were, "Long live sacred Germany"

General Fromm had Stauffenberg buried, and this memorial stone marks the spot, but the SS dug up his body, stripped him of his medals, cremated his body and disposed of his remains in an unknown location.

In the aftermath, the SS and Gestapo arrested 7000 people and executed 5000 of these, including General Fromm. Stauffenberg's brother Berthold, who was a co-conspirator, was tortured to death by the SS. Stauffenberg's wife and 5 children were imprisoned but thankfully all of them survived the war. After the war, one of his sons rose to become a General in the West German Army. His wife, The Countess Nina von Stauffenberg never re-married. She died in 2006.

Picture of street sign

After the war, Stauffenberg became a revered figure. Here you can see one of many streets all over Germany named after him in his honour.

Picture of bust

Here is the bust of Stauffenberg at the German Resistance memorial centre in Berlin, which is located in the former offices of the Wehrmacht High Command

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Bonhoeffer intro slide

- Born: 4 February 1906
- Died: 9 April 1945 (Aged 39)
- Profession: Theologian and Church Pastor
- Employment during WW2: Agent at the Abwehr (German Military Intelligence) under the protection of Admiral Wilhelm Canaris (Head of Abwehr) and his deputy Major General Hans Oster

Picture of biography

Before the war Bonhoeffer was a church pastor to German expats in London. He also spent some time in New York. Seeing how black people were treated in the USA was formative for him and he compared this to how Jews were treated in Germany. He could have stayed in America but chose to go back to Germany to suffer with his people. He was a man of action. He was also very likeable.

Being an agent at the Abwehr he was able to travel outside Germany and use his many foreign contacts and language skills. His superiors were able to stop him being drafted into the Army. He was protected there and was able to plot against Hitler and the Nazis, working together with several colleagues. This culminated in his support for the Stauffenberg plot.

Quote Slide

“We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.” - Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Bonhoeffer was involved with smuggling some Jews out of Germany

Before the war, he and some others broke away from the German state church to form the Confessing Church, which resisted Nazi ideology.

Memorial stone

Here is the memorial stone for Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others at the Flossenbug concentration camp. All the other names are military, with military rank. Bonhoeffer was implicated in the Stauffenberg plot when the so called ‘Zossen file’ was discovered. This file was a dossier of war crimes but unfortunately it contained the names of conspirators. After a drumhead Court Martial at the camp, at which he declined to defend himself, Bonhoeffer was hung, possibly using piano wire, naked together with Admiral Canaris and Major General Oster and others by the SS on the personal orders of The Fuhrer, Adolf Hitler. Hitler was in a rage after reading Canaris’s diaries which had just been discovered. The hangings were filmed for Hitler’s entertainment. With short drop hangings like these, the death struggle can last for up to 20 minutes. They may also have been tortured beforehand. Their corpses were then disposed of on a bonfire. When news of Bonhoeffer’s death emerged, his family and fiancée could barely take in the fact that the lovely Dietrich was gone. A memorial service was held in London by his friends there and broadcast by the BBC. His family listened to it on their radio, which was some small consolation for them.

Picture of book

Bonhoeffer’s writings live on. *Letters and Papers from Prison* which were written whilst at Tegel Military Prison, is particularly widely read and admired. They resonate with St Paul’s prison letters in the New Testament, when St Paul was awaiting trial before Caesar, and then execution.

Quote Slide

“When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Bonhoeffer wanted to suffer with his people and he saw this as his Christian duty. With others he worked to overthrow the Nazis and in the end it cost him everything.

Statue slide

This statue of Bonhoeffer is not in Germany, but right here in England at Westminster Abbey. He is loved and admired all over the world.

Sophie Scholl

Intro slide

- Born: 9 May 1921
- Died: 22 February 1943 (Aged 21)
- Occupation: Philosophy and biology student - and member of the White Rose non-violent resistance group in Munich

Picture of Sophie

Here is Sophie Scholl. She was involved in posting anti-war and anti-Nazi leaflets inside Germany as part of the White Rose group. Their first leaflet ended with the statement, "Do not forget that every nation deserves the government that it endures." They also conducted a graffiti campaign daubing slogans such as "Down with Hitler" on buildings all over Munich.

It was incredibly risky to go against the Nazi regime, which had created a terror state. Sophie was caught when leaving leaflets at the University of Munich. When arrested, she was very brave under Gestapo interrogation which lasted 17 hours. She didn't betray anyone, but the Gestapo caught everyone by searching houses and seizing papers and evidence. In the end she admitted to everything she'd done but remained defiant.

Picture of trial

A harrowing German film has been made about her and the White Rose, and this is a screenshot. Sophie Scholl appears here at this show-trial before Hitler's 'hanging judge' Roland Friesler, who had flown down specially from Berlin to conduct the trial. He is the one in the scarlet robes. He was infamous for insulting and belittling those before him, in front of witnesses. The courtroom was filled by invitation only. At the trial Sophie Scholl said, "What we said and wrote are what many people are thinking. They just don't dare say it out loud!" She effectively accused the courtroom members of being cowards. Sophie's brother Hans had also been as brave. In the trial he called out, "You will soon stand where we stand now." The Reichsfuhrer-SS Heinrich Himmler was personally involved in discussions before the trial about the execution of the defendants. Himmler overruled a plan to publically hang them outside the university, fearing it could lead to demonstrations. Her father Robert Scholl had spent several weeks in prison for criticising Hitler. He arrived during the trial but was not allowed to participate. However, he managed to shout through the open door of the courtroom, "There is a higher justice!" and "They will go down in history!"

Dialogue slide

At the end of the trial Roland Freisler asked if she hadn't "indeed come to the conclusion that your conduct and the actions along with your brother and other persons in the present phase of the war should be seen as a crime against the community?"

Sophie Scholl replied: "I am, now as before, of the opinion that I did the best that I could do for my nation. I therefore do not regret my conduct and will bear the consequences that result from my conduct."

Sophie Scholl was found guilty of aiding and abetting the enemy and of high treason. She was sentenced to death by beheading. The sentence was carried out in prison the same day.

Last words of Sophie Scholl slide

Here are the last words of Sophie Scholl:

"How can we expect righteousness to prevail when there is hardly anyone willing to give himself up individually to a righteous cause? Such a fine, sunny day, and I have to go, but what does my death matter, if through us, thousands of people are awakened and stirred to action?"

The White Rose leaflets Sophie was distributing were smuggled out of Germany and brought to England where millions of copies were printed and then dropped all over Germany by the RAF.

Guillotine Slide

This is the actual guillotine that was used to behead Sophie Scholl and her brother that day. During the Nazi era this single guillotine was used to execute 16,000 prisoners in Munich.

Walhalla Temple slide

This is the Walhalla Temple in Bavaria. It is a memorial to great Germans. In 2003 Sophie Scholl was added to the pantheon.

Sophie Scholl bust

Here is the bust of Sophie Scholl inside the Walhalla temple. (Pause)

Conclusion

Nietzsche slide

“That which is done out of love always takes place beyond good and evil.”

In conclusion, to recap, this aphorism captures my central philosophical thesis for this talk: that we can recognise what is good even though we cannot make full sense of it. Ethics is real, not ideal. There is no satisfactory overall theory of ethics that we can find. But rather ethics is real so we can recognise goodness and virtue when we see it. This applies even under the extreme conditions I have been talking about. Ethics is not a theory, it's a reality. Being ethical involves struggle. The 'magical must' of ethics is real.

After the war, these 3 people took on great importance for the German people. Whilst most had, not all Germans had gone along with Hitler and the Nazis. These 3 and some others played a very important role in redeeming the German people in the sight of the world. All 3 are now celebrated, even though they broke fundamental ethical norms including some or all of: murder, deception, treachery, and high treason.

I hope you feel inspired by these 3 individuals and what they did. War is a grim subject, but I hope that your spirit is lifted by the example of these 3 exceptional, good people.

Questions slide