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## Reviews

### Reviews: The lives of others

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*Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* by **Judith Butler** (Verso) **£14.99/\$26.95 (hb)**

*Killing in War* by **Jeff McMahan** (Oxford University Press) **£19.99/\$35.00 (hb)**



War is losing the battle for hearts and minds. Never very popular, the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan have come to be seen as ever more futile, expensive and interminable. As increasing numbers of young soldiers die in Afghanistan, the British government is under serious pressure to pull troops out at the same time as the US becomes yet more entrenched. Meanwhile, the last man in Britain to have fought in World War I, Harry Patch, who died recently at the age of 111, far from being proud of his involvement, claimed that “war is organised murder, and nothing else.”

Two authors of recent books on war, Judith Butler and Jeff McMahan, whilst taking very different approaches to the topic, would in the main agree with Patch. What the two books share, apart from a deep antipathy to recent military campaigns, is a desire to rethink classical approaches to war. For McMahan, this takes the form of a highly persuasive critique of just war theory, with a particularly acute attack on Michael Walzer, its leading theorist. For Butler it involves rethinking the “frames” of war, the way we conceive of different lives, the way some lives seem to “count” while others barely feature at all. As such, Butler’s

approach focuses on the media, particularly photography, whilst McMahan's approach effectively combines analytic moral philosophy with historical and contemporary cases. Both are vital contributions to an important, but often surprisingly neglected, debate about the morality and ethical status of war.

McMahan takes issue with one of the key principles of just war theory, namely that there is a meaningful difference between the legality of the *resort* to war (*jus ad bellum*) and the *conduct* of war (*jus in bello*). By virtue of this separation, just war theory tends to argue that there is no overlap between behaviour inside of war and behaviour outside of it – this separation being the reason why, for example we would prosecute someone for murder if they attacked a fellow citizen, but would excuse a soldier killing another soldier in war-time (and perhaps even celebrate him or her for doing so).

This distinction is related to the classical theory of the “moral equality of soldiers”, the idea that within the context or “frame” of war, in Butler's language, the moral status of any combatant is independent of the moral character of that war. Thus a combatant fighting in an unjust war (a war that lacks a just cause) may still have an equal right to kill other combatants, regardless of whether the war has a just cause. As McMahan put it: “This is the idea that no one does wrong, or acts impermissibly, merely by fighting in a war that turns out to be unjust.”

But this is precisely what McMahan sets out to dispute. If, he argues, people believed that participation in an unjust or morally unjustified war is wrong, this would considerably alter the practice of war and restore moral agency to the both those who vote for or against war, and those who fight in them. For, as he points out, “most people do care about morality, and constrain their behaviour in the light of their moral beliefs.” War should therefore not be seen as an activity that is “morally discontinuous” with peacetime activities.

McMahan carefully and systematically works his way through all of the arguments for and against notions of agency in and outside of wartime, taking very seriously the idea that “we need to identify what it is about the conditions of war that renders inapplicable the moral principles that govern other areas of life”, in particular, the killing of the morally innocent in wartime. Ultimately, as McMahan expertly demonstrates, there is really nothing – not institutional command, procedural guarantees, the “special” nature of war itself, the description of combat – that adequately and cleanly differentiates war from non-war. This being so, we need to radically rethink the way we justify war, the way we fight in war and the agency of the combatants we get to do our fighting for us.

McMahan is not, it should be noted, a pacifist, and he justifies the declaration of war against the Nazis as a just move, for example, but he sets the bar for entry into and participation in war much higher than just war theorists and our governments have done in recent years. McMahan's book urgently needs to be read not only by combatants, to whom McMahan restores a real and profound sense of moral agency and autonomy, but by anyone who has voted for, backed, or declared war of any kind.

Butler, in *Frames of War*, rather than focusing on the morality of action within war, turns her attention to the ways in which war, torture and violence are represented to us, and the impact this has on our understanding of the value of life and the possibilities we have for “grieving”. Butler takes the media representation of lives as her starting point: we are aware of, but rarely reflect upon, the fact that some lives seem to “count” more than others: hundreds of Haitian refugees dying when their boat capsizes are given a byline, a single British tourist killed in an accident gets a page.

Butler describes her project as both an epistemological one (what “frames” do we use to understand a life?) and an ontological one (simply put, what *is* a life?). Continuing the line of investigation she started in *Precarious Life* (2004), Butler argues that “the precarity of life imposes an obligation upon us.” But this “obligation” is of course easy to ignore, and its weight depends upon the “frame”: “there is no life and no death without a relation to some frame.”

In a way, although with very different reference points, Butler is addressing similar questions to McMahan. Her “frames” are “the ways of selectively carving up experience as essential to the conduct of war.” In other words, the ways in which the decision to go to war, the way in which the war is fought and the way the images of war are presented by the media. The Obama administration’s recent decision to lift the ban on photographs of the coffins of US troops is an interesting case in point: do the caskets reveal the heroic sacrifices made in war or do they, as previous administrations thought, undermine the war effort?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most successful part of Butler’s often densely worded book, is the long essay “Torture and the Ethics of Photography”. Here Butler addresses Susan Sontag’s work on photography and war via the images that emerged from Abu Ghraib. Butler suggests that “There is not only a certain pleasure involved in the scenes of torture, something we must consider, but also a pleasure, or perhaps a compulsion, involved in the act of taking the photograph itself.” In the age of immediate communicability and the easy online sharing of images, Butler suggests that we should rethink the ambiguity and framing of images, particularly those relating to war, rather than be too quick to claim we understand what is really happening within them.

Other essays usefully address the increasingly problematic use of “liberal” values (secularism, feminism, acceptance of gay rights) in the name of war. In “Sexual Politics, Torture, and Time” she asks, pointedly, “have feminism and the struggle for sexual freedom become, horrifyingly, a ‘sign’ of the civilisational mission in progress?” It is difficult yet pressing questions like these that make *Frames of War* an important contribution to what will no doubt be an ongoing philosophical and political discussion about the rights and wrongs of war.

McMahon’s book offers some fine, clear answers including a call for an “impartial international court” to adjudicate upon the rightness or otherwise of waging war, whilst Butler’s book leaves open the question of the extent to which we are all complicit in the way in which lives are counted and framed. Both thinkers should be central in any careful discussion of war, and even more so in the frequently reckless decision to wage it.

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## Discussion

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“...do the caskets reveal the heroic sacrifices made in war or do they, as previous administrations thought, undermine the war effort?”

Are these two questions mutually exclusive?

Posted by *Ryan Mattson* | [October 7, 2009, 2:11 pm](#)

2. [...] excellent... (Montgomery Burns edition) October 7, 2009 Infinite Thought has a nice review up of Judith Butler’s *Frames of War* and Jeff McMahan’s *Killing in War*, and though it’s [...]

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