Chapter 1
Weapons Design and Its Justification

ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces some key concepts and ideas that play an important role in the book. For instance, the concepts of weapons design and weapons research are introduced. The author outlines the (simple) moral system, basic morality, that he will use to make moral judgements about weapons design. And he gives the standard justification of weapons design, and all forms of defence spending, which he calls the standard justification. The aim of the book could be said to be the project of showing that this does not serve to justify weapons research and design.

INTRODUCTION

This book is about weapons design and development, a series of activities which aim to invent (design) new weapons or to improve existing ones. I shall refer to these activities simply as weapons design or weapons research and those who take part as weapons designers or weapons researchers. Almost all weapons are items belonging to the category of artefacts, namely objects made with some purpose or purposes in mind.1 Research activities that aim to design new or improved artefacts of a given kind is, in modern parlance, clearly an instance of applied research, may therefore be evaluated with reference to (what seems to be the main) purpose of the artefact in question. If the artefact

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is not of any great import, such as a better toaster or perfect mousetrap, then no one would be much interested in making any moral judgement about it. However, some such activities are clearly highly important and affect our lives in significant ways. Biomedical research is evidently one form of research that we normally judge to be a good thing and worth supporting because of the future health benefits that we hope it will deliver. And surely the search for new weapons is a form of research that is also highly important, after all it has delivered, among other things, nuclear armaments, and these have the potential to affect our lives more radically than any other human invention, and not in good ways. The implication here, which I intend, is that weapons are harmful or potentially harmful, which suggests that they are bad things because harming is bad. Consequently, weapons design needs to be justified.

If everyone believed that weapons were bad, then (one assumes) there would be no weapons, because unlike some other bad things in the world, weapons are artefacts, things we create. If we believed they were bad, we would simply not create them.

There is, however, a widespread belief that weapons are also the means to protect or defend, to defend individuals, their country, their way of life and so on. So any judgement about weapons being harmful must be qualified, given this perspective, with the provision that weapons are necessary for preventing others from harming. If no one ever wanted to harm anyone else, then indeed weapons would be unnecessary, bad even, but since some do, then we (‘good people’) must have weapons to defend ourselves – so the story goes. This perspective presupposes that there are those who would harm others if they could and these people must be prevented from doing so. There are other views about the utility of weapons, but this is the one I want to engage with in this book. I will call it the standard justification and understand it to apply to all elements of weapons acquisition, including weapons design, and I will give some evidence in this chapter that this justification is indeed ‘standard’. I am, however, going to argue in this book that it should be rejected and hence that weapons research is not only an activity that is morally wrong because it introduces new ways to harm into the world, but that it is ultimately unjustifiable. If the standard justification can be overturned, then I shall assume that this is enough to establish that weapons design is unjustifiable. Most readers will, I suspect, think that it is not possible to overturn the standard justification understood as having at least some validity – no doubt some episodes of weapons research have been unjustifiable, but surely not all?
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