'Collateral Damage:' A Euphemism for Murder?

As a student and teacher of ethics, I am interested not only in what humans do but also in how we talk about what we do. That includes the words we use, or oftentimes misuse. I hope not to misuse language in the ruminations that follow.

Recently I have been intrigued and chagrined by talk of “collateral damage” in war zones of the Middle East.

Language is power, and the use or misuse of language may have powerful effects.

Language describes realities, but it also creates realities. Therefore, moral creatures like us are encouraged to be careful how we use language lest we misuse it and violate other norms as well.

We take care lest we violate norms such as that universal rule against murder—which is normally understood as the deliberate and unlawful killing of innocents. Murder is killing that ought not to occur. Humans of every language and society have strong strictures against that sort of behavior. It is wrong to murder, we all agree. Murder is forbidden. Thou shalt not.

But what if we call a murderous act by some other name? What if we call it homicide?

Still wrong. All agree.

What if we call it genocide, fratricide, patricide, infanticide, or some other “-cide” word?

Still wrong, we say. The alternative language simply makes specific the kind of murder it is. But call it what you may, killing innocents is wrong.
So maybe we don’t use any of those synonyms for murder. What if we call what we do—those human actions that result too often in the death of innocents—what if we instead term them “anti-terrorism,” “counter-insurgency,” “national defense,” “Desert Storm” or “Shock and Awe,” or “just war,” or just plain “war?” And what if we rename the results of some warring actions that result in the deaths of innocents? Suppose that we call that outcome “collateral damage” rather than the “m” word?

Collateral damage?

We know what “damage” is. It’s “damage” when a tornado tears up a neighborhood’s houses or the neighborhood kids come over to play at your house. It’s “damage” that happens when the car gets bumped in the school parking lot or when a politician or movie star misspeaks in public. Then someone does “damage control.”

It’s also “damage” that occurs when we take down a diseased tree in the backyard and it falls just slightly the wrong way, scraping the neighbor’s house and breaking a window. That might even be “collateral damage,” since we knew it could well happen, yet both the neighbor and I thought the risk of damage to be worth the value of getting rid of a dead tree. “Collateral damage” means taking the bad with the good.

In medical ethics we talk about something else called “iatrogenic effects.” It’s rather like “collateral damage,” but happens in the patient’s body. Iatrogenic effect is when the doctor’s treatment has not only a curative effect but a harmful one as well. You take out the gall bladder but end up with painful scar tissue and maybe a staph infection. Iatrogenic effects are a sort of collateral damage.

In medical ethics we also use the language of “double effect.” This comes especially from Catholic moral theology. The principle of double effect acknowledges that sometimes our clinical attempts to alleviate pain and suffering at the end of life have the unintended result of hastening death. Earlier death is the secondary effect of pain relief in those relatively rare situations. And Catholic
ethics and bioethics generally say that our morality allows for such practices when we intend only to relieve the dying patient’s suffering. The unintended hastening of death in those sad situations is a sort of collateral damage that we find morally acceptable. That’s the principle of double effect.

But what is this double speak that we hear from other quarters these days whereby what would otherwise be deemed wanton murder or maiming is referred to as collateral damage in the act of war?

It’s a euphemism, obviously. We started using it back during the Vietnam War. Now “collateral damage” has become an accepted part of military lingo. The U.S. Air Force Intelligence Targeting Guide defines collateral damage as “unintentional damage or incidental damage affecting facilities, equipment or personnel, occurring as a result of military actions directed against targeted enemy forces or facilities.”

So what’s been going on in southern Lebanon and northern Israel this summer? And in Iraq and Afghanistan for years? Are thousands of civilian war deaths justifiable “collateral damage?” Or is this just plain murder?

Intentionally dropping bombs on or launching rockets toward neighborhoods known to be populated with children, the elderly and other noncombatant innocents, killing or maiming them knowingly even while intending and aiming at some other desired outcome related to national defense or whatever—how is this permissible?

Surely there is no greater good that is served here. The cycle of violence is perpetuated. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life, tit for tat. It never ends. And we seem never to learn.

Calling those murders and maimings “collateral damage” is euphemistic double speak, not double effect. It is wrong—unjustified and, I think, morally unjustifiable.
Even just war theory does not allow for these actions, or places stringent limits guided by principles of discrimination and proportionality. Dropping bombs on the munitions factory and destroying an unoccupied warehouse next door might indeed be justifiable collateral damage; but not so the elementary school filled with children, nor the church or mosque or synagogue filled with worshipers, nor the midday market, nor the neighborhood homes in which both young and old are sleeping or eating, watching TV or talking to family members in the U.S. on their cell phones. “Just” warriors, if such exist, surely would find another way to fulfill their mission.

The military killing of civilian innocents when you know they are there, or probably so, is not justifiable collateral damage. Let’s just say the “m” word. It’s murder. And it’s immoral. No matter who does it—terrorists or counter-terrorists, insurgents or counter-insurgents, Hezbollah or Israel—the murder and maiming of civilians is wrong.

When hijacked planes struck our twin towers on Sept. 11, 2001, we didn’t call the thousands of lives lost there “collateral damage,” even though their murderers may have thought in those terms.

And when hundreds or thousands of civilians are murdered in Lebanon or Israel, Iraq or Afghanistan, we ought not call it anything but what it is. It is not collateral damage nor iatrogenic or double effect. Killing innocents is murder. We have sinned. Our allies have sinned. Their enemies, and ours, have sinned.

May God, or G-d, or Allah have mercy on us all.

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