

EXPLORING THE MORAL DIMENSIONS OF ARMED CONFLICT: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE MORALITY OF WAR AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMANITY

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Abstract

The morality of war is a complex and enduring dilemma, challenging scholars and policymakers to balance competing values: protecting human life, upholding justice, and ensuring security. This article examines the major philosophical perspectives on war's morality – realism, pacifism, and Just War Theory – analyzing their core principles, critiques, and real-world implications. Key issues like the distinction between combatants and non-combatants, probability of success, and justice after war are explored, highlighting the tensions between moral ideals and practical realities. The article argues that grappling with these ethical dilemmas is essential for promoting peace, accountability, and human dignity in an increasingly complex global landscape, and calls for nuanced consideration of moral principles, international law, and contextual factors in evaluating war's legitimacy and consequences.

Key Words: Morality, War and Justice.

Introduction

War is a state of armed conflict between nations, societies, or groups, often resulting in significant human suffering and loss. The devastating consequences of war are evident in the destruction of infrastructure, displacement of people, and loss of life. For instance, World War II resulted in an estimated 50-80 million fatalities, while more recent conflicts in Syria and Yemen have led to hundreds of thousands of deaths and millions of displaced people.

Morality, in this context, refers to the principles and values guiding our judgments about the conduct and consequences of war (Omeregbe, J. 1993: p. 5). It involves considering questions

like: Is war ever justified? What are the rules for conducting war? How do we balance national interests with human rights and international law?

The morality of war has been debated by philosophers, theologians, and politicians throughout history. Ancient civilizations like the Greeks and Romans accepted war as a natural part of politics, while medieval Christian thinkers developed the concept of just war to reconcile faith with violence. Modern debates continue to grapple with the balance between national interests, human rights, and international law.

The complexity of war's morality is reflected in ongoing conflicts and changing global dynamics. As we explore the morality of war, we'll examine frameworks like just war theory, arguments for and against war, international law, and philosophical perspectives.

The Morality of War: A Multifaceted Debate.

The morality of war is a complex and contentious issue, with various philosophical perspectives offering distinct views on the legitimacy and morality of violence in international relations.

In light of the huge number of casualties during wars throughout history, scholars have developed various traditions of thought through which to understand war, such as realism, pacifism and just war theory, among others. Regarding the realist approach, states act to maximize what is often called the national interest, which at times may require the use of force (Viotti and Kaupi, 1999: p. 56). It might be deduced from this explanation that in the realist approach that there is no moral condition in war. Furthermore, morality cannot be applied to international relations. From states' perspective, their will to pursue their own crucial interests is indispensable. For this purpose, states should not hesitate to go to war. In the realist tradition, after war has commenced there should not be any moral principle on the battlefield. In short, a state should do all it can to win. Realists are concerned about power politics and national interest. They are state-centric and moral considerations are secondary to national interests. According to Realists, war is a means to achieve power, protect interests, or ensure security. With this line of thought, realism can justify aggression and neglect human right.

In line with the foregoing, Quareshi posited that for realists, reality is self-centered and murderous, devoid of moral requirements. In this world, "anything goes." Realists reject the application of concepts of morality, such as justice, and instead advocate for national interests of power and security in egoistic and selfish terms. From a realist perspective, a state is only concerned with its own interests and not concerned about peace or the general welfare of any other state. Take the United Nations (U.N.), for example. Of course, the U.N. exists as an organization, but it is seen by realists as a mere association of countries and not as a supreme government over all countries. Only powerful countries, such as the permanent five (and particularly the US), can have their way in the U.N. Because there is no supreme authority, weak states are insecure and "vulnerable to attacks and encroachments of other countries. In this selfish environment, a state can only rely on itself to protect its national security and interests (Quareshi, W. 2020, p. 96).

Warfare realists believe there should be no distinction between combatants and noncombatants, as long as they are acting on the enemy side. Such realists want no moral or ethical code during the conduct of warfare but demand ethical behavior from other human beings during their everyday relationships. This includes economic and financial relations. Nevertheless, apart from the acute moral and logical constraints on realism, the realist perspective gives us a glimpse of how the real world works. It explains a lot about how wars are waged by superpowers under the false pretenses of just cause.

However, the moral and ethical concepts of just war doctrines have been applied in foreign relations and war policies for more than a century. In response to realist arguments, Orend argues that people's morality and ethics are applicable, reflected in foreign policies, and are forced by people onto their governments (Quareshi, W. 2020, p. 97).

In contrast to the realist approach, according to pacifists' morality is the highest virtue that can and should be applied to international relations. However, as Claude puts forward, "Pacifism has not been, nor is it likely to become, the dominant doctrine of any state or international organization. Some flirting with pacifism, however, has occurred whenever the ugliness and danger of war have been particularly apparent. The urge to denounce war unconditionally and indiscriminately is occasionally irresistible (Claude, 1980: p. 87). In terms of Claude's view, human beings support pacifism in peacetime. But when human nature and interests become involved in an issue, the ideals which are advocated in peacetime can become altered. This perspective points out that the main reason for war is human nature. In terms of pacifism, when people comprehend that war is needless, the world can be a place where people live in peace. The Pacifists advocates for nonviolent and human dignity. People like Gandhi and Tolstoy, oppose war and violence, emphasizing value of human life, nonviolent conflict resolution, moral obligation, critique of violence. In extreme situations, pacifism can be seen as unrealistic or ineffective.

Following Claude's line of thought, unless human nature changes, it seems that this is impossible. So far, in order to answer the main question "can war be morally right?", realist and pacifist approaches have been examined. According to the realists, war cannot be moral because ethical principles cannot be applied to war. Meanwhile, according to the pacifists, war cannot be ethical because it is always wrong. At this point, it is time to analyze just war theory, which proposes that war can be ethical under certain conditions. It could be claimed that just war theory tries to meet realists and pacifists halfway. In this sense, in the terms of just war theorists, war can be sometimes moral and sometimes amoral. To decide whether war is moral or amoral, just war theorists have proposed various requirements, such as just cause, right intention, right authority, open declaration, last resort, reasonable hope and proportionality, among others.

The Just War Theory

Just war theory is the attempt to distinguish between justifiable and unjustifiable uses of organized armed forces. It is a set of conditions justifying the resort to war and prescribing how war may permissibly be conducted. It is the doctrine that a state or group of individuals may justly go to

war for some restricted reasons, which are centrally those of self-defense, and the rescue of another state or individuals from an aggressor. The just war theory is a western approach to the moral assessment of war that grew out of the Christian tradition. The tradition began in the ancient Greek society, and was later developed by a number of Christian theologians.

However, the just war tradition includes a great variety of thinkers who advocate different ways of employing shared concepts (just cause, good intentions, proportionality, discrimination, among others) for purposes of ethical reflection and judgment about the use of force, and the tradition has been expanded to include non-traditional forms of warfare, such as guerrilla war and humanitarian interventions. The just war theory, however, is not unique to the western world. It was and still is practiced in the African context. Traditionally, war in most African communities, was waged and conducted after very serious moral consideration and fought within a strict set of parameters. The war was only sanctioned by the community elders who were the legitimate authorities and custodians of the communities' culture, welfare and value systems. They also defined the parameters within which war was to be conducted. These parameters included: attacks against, and mistreatment of, non-combatants, wounded soldiers, and prisoners; genocide, whether of a people, nation or ethnic minorities; indiscriminate destruction of whole cities or vast areas with their inhabitants; destruction of both natural and human resources and that the ultimate objective of the war was to restore peace and harmony among warring communities.

Just War theory has grown to encompass modern political doctrines which promote the view that a specific war is just given satisfactory conditions. As "conditions" tend to be variable, open to interpretation, and otherwise subject to political obfuscation, the concept of Just War itself, even apart from any specific formulated doctrines, is controversial. The controversies may arise from the problem of deciding whether, for example, self-defense may be broadened from defense against actual attack, to defense against threats or against perceived threats, and whether it is permissible to make pre-emptive strikes. These kinds of controversies were even more evident during the Iraq war of 2006.

In the run up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq the question whether the war was a just war was posed. Many of those on both sides of the debate framed their arguments in terms of the Just War. They came to quite different conclusions because they put different interpretations on how the just war criteria should be applied. Supporters of the war tended to accept the US position that the enforcement of UN resolutions was sufficient authority or even, as in the case of the Land Letter, which the United States as a sovereign nation could count as legitimate authority.

Opponents of the war tended to interpret legitimate authority as requiring a specific Security Council resolution. While proponents of the just war theory claim that their views have a long tradition, their critics claim the application of Just War is only relativistic, and directly contradicts more universal philosophical traditions such as the Ethic of reciprocity as evidenced in retributive justice. The Just War tradition is first of all a set of criteria that act as an aid to determining whether or not resorting to arms is the morally preferable course. On a more basic level it is a view that

combines a moral abhorrence towards war and a readiness to accept that sometimes war is the lesser evil. It is an attempt to distinguish between justifiable and unjustifiable uses of organized armed forces. Just War theories attempt to conceive of how the use of arms might be restrained, made more humane, and ultimately directed towards the aim of establishing lasting peace and justice. The idea that resorting to war can only be just under certain conditions goes back at least to Cicero. Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas and Hugo Grotius later codified a set of rules for a just war, which today still encompass the points commonly debated, with some modifications. Proposed conditions for a just war vary in both number and interpretation. For a war to be considered just, it must meet the following criteria or principles:

1. Just cause: A just war must have a legitimate reason for going to war. This requires war only be used in response to serious wrongs. An actual or imminent wrong against the state, usually a violation of rights, but sometimes provided by the need to protect innocents, defend human rights, or safeguard the way of life of one's own other people. The most common example of just cause is self-defense, though coming to the defense of another innocent nation is also seen as a just cause by many (and perhaps the highest cause).

2. Competent authority: This demands war only be declared by leaders of a recognized political community and with the political requirements of that community. War must be authorized by a recognized governing body or international institution. The undertaking of war must be limited to a state's legitimate rulers.

3. Right intention: This requires that war-time political leaders be solely motivated, at a personal level, by reasons that make a war just. For example, even if war is waged in defense of another innocent country, leaders cannot resort to war because it will assist their re-election campaign. They should aim only at peace and the ends of the just cause (and not war's attendant suffering, death, and destruction).

4. Proportionality: This requires us to imagine what the world would look like if we either did or didn't go to war. For a war to be 'just' the quality of the peace resulting from war needs to be superior to what would have happened if no war had been fought. This also requires we have some probability of success in going to war otherwise people will suffer and die needlessly. Factors like casualties, displacement, suffering, destruction and reconstruction expenses, damage to ecosystems and infrastructure must be put into consideration. The anticipated good must, as a matter of principle not be outweighed by bad. Prior to going to war, the involved state must assess the overall good expected to come from the war. If the state believes that going to war will advance the general welfare of its citizens, protect the state's independence and integrity, uphold justice, or allow for self-defense, then going to war is justified. However, in doing so, the state must ensure that the proportion of the overall good that will come from the war is fairly high (Orji, 2023, p. 284). The leader may adopt Jeremy Bentham's Ethical Hedonism (actions are right if they promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people) (Bentham, 1979, p. 38) in assessing the success of any war.

5. Last resort: This says we should explore all other reasonable options before going to war such as negotiation, diplomacy, economic sanctions and so on. Even if the principles of jus ad bellum are met, there are still ways war can be unjust. All peaceful means must be exhausted before resorting to war.

In the words of Quareshi, every non-military option for meeting the threat in question has been explored, with reasonable grounds for believing that other measures will not succeed. The reason for this is straightforward: wars are terrible and efforts should be made to avoid them in order to reduce the suffering of humankind and the waste of resources. Therefore, nonviolent alternatives, such as sanctions, mediation, and diplomatic negotiations, must be resorted to before using force. However, on occasion—for example in situations of economic sanctions—innocent human beings are found to be more affected by nonviolent means than they would have been by violence (Quareshi, W. 2020, p. 104).

6. Probability of success: This is a key criterion in Just War Theory for evaluating the morality of going to war (jus ad bellum). It requires that the war have a reasonable chance of achieving its objectives. There must be a reasonable prospect that the war will succeed. A state must be well-prepared and certain of its victory before entering a conflict. Sending soldiers into combat when you know they will fail serves no purpose. If a leader of state engages in such behavior, they have disregarded their duties and committed war crimes. Consequently, it is anticipated that a decent level of readiness will always be shown. Prior to starting a battle, the army needs to be sufficiently strong and trained. As a matter of fact, the army's proficiency with military strategies, its ability to employ a wide range of weaponry, its soldiers' skills, their knowledge of terrain, their ability to accurately assess the strength of their opponents, and other factors all play a role in determining the army's superiority in combat. All of these precautions and procedures are vital, but it is important to remember that they do not ensure victory in battle. A strong army might occasionally lose a war due to an error in judgment. When an aggressor chooses to use a pacifist state as a pretext to inflict terrible pain on its adversaries rather than honoring or respecting the spirit of such moral principles, the issue becomes even more complicated.

8. Discrimination: prohibiting the killing of noncombatants and/or innocents. Hence, just war theory embraces principles about the way war may be conducted, generally ruling out gratuitous violence, assassinations, war against civilians among others. However, in some war situations, it may happen that some deaths occur though the intention of going to war was not essentially to kill, but to address some evil in society, for instance social injustice in the distribution of national resources which is important for the development and sustainability of democracy. Democracy and equitable distribution of natural resources are irreplaceable requirements for peace and stability in any country. In the pursuit of democracy and social justice, some individuals may be forced to go to war in order to overcome dictatorship, tribally based politics, corruption and other social vices in their society.

In the Third world, especially Africa, this situation has been witnessed in some countries such as Zimbabwe, Sudan, Nigeria and Uganda among others, where the civil societies and non-governmental organizations have rebelled against the governments of the day to agitate for positive changes such as recognition and appreciation of social justice and other democratic ideals. In situations of this nature, war may be justified because its intention is not to cause destruction, but address some social anomalies. Just war theorists have traditionally concerned themselves with the grounds for going to war in the first place and with questions about moral conduct in warfare. But they should also be concerned that warfare is suspended and settled in ways that help to prevent more of the same. However, it is imperative that we look at 'justice after war' through a moral lens.

Justice After War: Rebuilding and Accountability in the Aftermath of Conflict.

The concept of "justice after war" (*jus post bellum*) addresses the moral and legal obligations that arise once a conflict has ended. It focuses on rebuilding, accountability, and redressing wrongs committed during war. As conflicts increasingly involve complex humanitarian crises, atrocities, and widespread destruction, ensuring justice post-war is critical for sustainable peace, reconciliation, and preventing future violence.

The tradition of just war theory and the international war conventions that emerged from it help us to see many of the ways in which the use of arms might be limited and controlled for the sake of international peace. In some ways, however, this tradition (as with every other tradition) fails to provide us with complete, reliable guidance for contending with present and future political realities like the post war justice. In recent years, some theorists, such as Gary Bass, Louis Iasiello and Brian Orend, have proposed a third category within Just War theory. *Jus post bellum* concerns justice after a war, including peace treaties, reconstruction, war crimes trials, and war reparations. Orend, for instance, proposes the following principles: (Sihda, Z, & Mbaruru, M. 2016, p. 62)

1. Just cause for termination: A state may terminate a war if there has been a reasonable vindication of the rights that were violated in the first place, and if the aggressor is willing to negotiate the terms of surrender. These terms of surrender include a formal apology, compensations, war crimes trials and perhaps rehabilitation.

2. Right intention: A state must only terminate a war under the conditions agreed upon in the above criteria. Revenge is not permitted. The victor state must also be willing to apply the same level of objectivity and investigation into any war crimes its armed forces may have committed.

3. Public declaration and authority: The terms of peace must be made by a legitimate authority, and the terms must be accepted by a legitimate authority. This was common in the traditional African context where the elders (legitimate authority) from the warring communities were to meet and declare publicly the cessation of war and eventual reconciliation and peace which was in most cases sealed through oath taking which as a covenant between the parties involved. Once this had been declared, the warring communities respected this decision.

4. Discrimination: The victor state is to differentiate between political and military leaders, and combatants and civilians. Punitive measures are to be limited to those directly responsible for the conflict. This applies equally both in the traditional African and modern contexts of war where it is the legitimate authorities and the combatants who are held responsible for whatever happened during the war, and not the civilians and innocents.

5. Proportionality: Any terms of surrender must be proportional to the rights that were initially violated. Draconian measures, absolutist crusades and any attempt at denying the surrendered country the right to participate in the world community are not permitted. For example, in the African communities, after a peace pact had been made (i.e. through post-war cleansing ceremony), socio-economic and political activities between the formerly warring communities had to go back to normal without any conditions.

Conclusion

The morality of war is a multifaceted and contentious issue, with various philosophical perspectives offering distinct views on the legitimacy and ethics of violence in international relations. Realists prioritize state interests and power, pacifists advocate for nonviolence and human dignity, and just war theory seeks a middle ground with criteria for just war. The distinction between combatants and non-combatants, probability of success, and justice after war are crucial considerations in evaluating war's morality.

Ultimately, the morality of war challenges us to balance competing values – protecting human life, upholding justice, and ensuring security. As conflicts evolve and new challenges emerge, grappling with these ethical dilemmas remains essential for promoting peace, accountability, and human dignity. The pursuit of peace, justice, and reconciliation is a continuous process, requiring careful consideration of moral principles, international law, and the complexities of human conflict.

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