

Entry Contents

Bibliography

Academic Tools

Friends PDF Preview

Author and Citation Info

Back to Top

War

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[Editor's Note: The following new entry by Seth Lazar replaces the **former entry** on this topic by the previous author.]

Some reject the very idea of the “morality of war”.^[1] Of those, some deny that morality applies at all once the guns strike up; for others, no plausible moral theory could license the exceptional horrors of war. The first group are sometimes called realists. The second group are pacifists. The task of just war theory is to seek a middle path between them: to justify at least some wars, but also to limit them (Ramsey 1961). Although realism undoubtedly has its adherents, few philosophers find it compelling.^[2] The real challenge to just war theory comes from pacifism. And we should remember, from the outset, that this challenge is real. The justified war might well be a chimera.

However, this entry explores the middle path between realism and pacifism. It begins by outlining the central substantive divide in contemporary just war theory, before introducing the methodological schisms underpinning that debate. It then discusses the moral evaluation of wars as a whole, and of individual acts within war (traditionally, though somewhat misleadingly, called *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* respectively).

- 1. Traditionalists and Revisionists
- 2. How Should We Think about the Morality of War?
 - 2.1 Historical vs Contemporary Just War Theory
 - 2.2 Institutions and Actions

- 2.3 Overarching Disputes in Contemporary Analytical Just War Theory
- 2.4 Dividing up the Subject Matter
- 2.5 The Decisive Role of Necessity and Proportionality
- 3. *Jus ad Bellum*
 - 3.1 Just Cause
 - 3.2 Just Peace
 - 3.3 Legitimate Authority
 - 3.4 Proportionality
 - 3.5 Last Resort (Necessity)
- 4. *Jus in Bello*
 - 4.1 Walzer and his Critics
 - 4.2 Killing Combatants
 - 4.3 Sparing Civilians
 - 4.4 Proportionality
 - 4.5 Necessity
- 5. The Future of Just War Theory
- Bibliography
- Academic Tools
- Other Internet Resources
- Related Entries

1. Traditionalists and Revisionists

Contemporary just war theory is dominated by two camps: traditionalist and revisionist.^[3] The traditionalists might as readily be called legalists. Their views on the morality of war are substantially led by international law, especially the law of armed conflict. They aim to provide those laws with morally defensible foundations. States (and only states) are permitted to go to war only for national defence, defence of other states, or to intervene to avert “crimes that shock the moral conscience of mankind” (Walzer 2006: 107). Civilians may not be targeted in war, but all combatants, whatever they are fighting for, are morally permitted to target one another, even when doing so foreseeably harms some civilians (so long as it does not do so excessively).^[4]

Revisionists question the moral standing of states and the permissibility of national defence, argue for expanded permissions

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[Chronological Archives](#)

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