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In Search of a Just War

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Introduction

War causes an unmeasurable amount of pain and suffering, particularly among the most vulnerable people. Yet, philosophy has continually attempted to justify war. This discussion paper aims to explore if there is a successful theory to justify war.

The literature surrounding the philosophy of war is vast. I have selected two philosophers to focus on; Michael Walzer and Richard Norman. I will briefly explain these two theories and pose several questions to act as a jumping off point in discussions.

Definitions

For the purposes of this paper and to help our discussion, here are some definitions;

- War is a large-scale armed conflict between organised groups.
 - Localised, smaller scale armed conflicts between disorganised groups, such as rival gangs or insurgent groups, do not meet this definition of war. For example, the 'Glasgow Ice Cream Wars' (The Scotsman, 2004) would not be classed as a true war.
- A state is defined as having;
 - A permanent population,
 - A defined territory,
 - A form of government,
 - The capacity to interact with other states.

(Shaw; 2003)

- Justification means that the act is morally permissible. To be justified is for an act to be considered the morally right thing to do. This is contrasted between an act being unjustifiable, but less morally repugnant than others.

Just War Theory

Just War Theory has its origins in medieval philosophy, and in 1977 a philosopher Michael Walzer published *Just and Unjust Wars*. This influential argument codified 20th century arguments and attitudes to war. Just War Theory is divided into three sections; what makes entering war justifiable (just ad bellum), what conduct in war is justifiable (just in bello), and what happens after the war (just post bello). This paper will focus on the justifications of entering war.

Walzer argues that states (and only states) are permitted to go to war only in defence of a state, or to intervene to avert “crimes that shock the moral conscience of mankind” (Walzer 2015: p107). This is the only **just cause** for war.

In addition to just cause, there must also be:

- Right intentions.
- Proper authority
- Last resort
- Proportionality of means
- Likelihood of success.

The right intentions requirement is distinct from just cause, as a state might have a justified cause to go to war (a genuine threat to borders) but use this cause to act on ulterior intentions. Walzer’s definition of a justified war rules out wars which are fought to increase territory, maximise profit, or eradicate/weaken another state. Furthermore, wars fought to increase a sphere of influence, be it religious or economic influence, are not justified. (Walzer; 2015, pg.55)

The proper authority requirement means that the government taking a country into war is following the wishes or best interest of the people they govern. We may take this to mean that the government is democratic, but Walzer seems to allow for non-democratic states to exercise Just War (Walzer; 2015, pg. 54)

Walzer includes the last resort principle, requiring all diplomatic efforts to be exhausted before war is considered an option. The principle of proportionality states that the amount of force used must not be too aggressive nor too mild to achieve the goal.

Finally, Walzer’ states that a war cannot be justified if there is no likelihood that there will be success. This is because Walzer account for war being a costly enterprise, and if there is no possibility of the result justifying the cost, war is not a morally justified option.

Are there any wars which truly meet Walzer’s definition as justified?

The Problem with Walzer's Just War Theory

Philosopher Brian Orend argues that a flaw with Walzer's argument is the requirement for proper intentions. This requirement is meant to prevent wars fought for unjust means, but it is only possible to know the intentions retrospectively (if at all). Walzer claims that a war fought with an ulterior motive of expanding territory, influence or power is not just, even if there is a true existential threat. But how is it possible to identify the ulterior motive? It may be impossible to distinguish between a war which is just, as it is fought for the right reasons, and a war which is not just, because it is fought with a proper cause but for the wrong reasons.

Furthermore, it may be the case that legitimate seeming reasons for entering war could be less so. For example, the reasons cited for entering into the Iraq War in 2003 was the presence of weapons of mass destruction. However, the reality seems not as clear cut.

This means that any war can be justified if the belligerent claims, sincerely or insincerely, that the other state constituted a threat to them. The most we can do is hold those who instigate unjust wars accountable. However, it fails at the purpose of defining which wars are justifiable pre-emptively.

A second flaw with Walzer's theory is the requirement of proper authority. Walzer argues that that a democratically elected government would have the right to go to war should the above requirements be met. I propose the authority to wage war is not so easily gained. While it is accepted that the government has the right to collect taxes and enact laws, I do not think it is accepted that any government has a mandate to go to war in the same way.

Unless there is a referendum on the subject of war, the war is not democratic. Even if this were the circumstances, would a simple majority be adequate? If there is still a substantial portion of the population is opposed to the war, is it unethical? However, this line of argument presumes the importance of democracy or public opinion is a factor in proper authority.

Pacifism

We have seen two issues with Walzer's theory, although many more have been proposed. In the face of these challenges, an alternative theory about the ethics of war can be considered.

Pacifism is an argument from philosopher Richard Norman, published in his book *Ethics, Killing and War*. Norman argues that other Just War Theories, including Walzer's, are too permissive of war and fail to consider the true cost. Rather than beginning from the assumption that war is justifiable and attempting to codify the reasons under which it is, Norman begins from the pacifist stance that war is *not* justified and then explores exceptions which could make war the only permissible action. In an earlier work,

Norman aims to ‘present the case for pacifism as strongly as possible’ (Norman, 1988. pg. 66). He does this through arguing that killing is wrong, and Just War Theory is not successful in negating in the right of a person not to be killed.

Norman argues that it is wrong to take a human life for three reasons. The first two are defined by well entrenched moral philosophies, deontology and rule utilitarianism. It is wrong to kill because we ourselves generally not like to be killed, and we should do unto others as we would have done unto ourselves (deontology). Also, no one would want to live in a world where it is accepted to go around killing each other (rule utilitarianism). These two moral philosophies categorise killing as impermissible due to these effects that it causes. Norman argues for a third reason; killing is wrong because of the impact it has on the individual whose life is deprived of them. Each life has unique importance, and the wrongness of killing stems from the impact on the individual. Norman argues that it is not the case that the special status of life is disregarded by a ‘justified war’. The act of killing and the consequences on the killed person, not to mention their loved ones, is the same regardless of peace or war time.

Yet, Norman does not commit to the pacifist stance that war is never permissible. In his 1995 work, Norman proposes the pacifist argument. Norman accepts that, on an individual level, it may be permissible to kill in order to save another life. For example, if a homicidal maniac attempts to kill someone, it would be permissible to kill them to save further lives. Walzer simply scales this argument up, and takes for granted the sanctity of human life can be put to one side should his requirements of a just war be fulfilled. Norman questions this position. On an individual level, the belligerent has nothing but his own actions to blame for their death. This is not the case for combatants in war, especially unwilling conscripted combatants.

Norman concludes that the only circumstance under which war is admissible, is one in which the war, with all of the destruction, death and harm, is less harmful than not going to war. Under Norman’s theory, there are incredibly few justifiable wars. For some, this is a flaw in his argument. For others, this is the very purpose.

Are there any wars which truly meet Norman’s definition as justified?

Conclusion

We have had a pitstop tour of two attitudes to war; Just War Theory and Pacifism.

Just War Theory states that war can be justified if it is fought with just intentions, by a proper authority, as a last resort, with proportional means and a reasonable likelihood of success.

Pacifism argues for violence prevention, and proposes that war is generally unjustifiable, but under rare circumstances is permissible. These rare circumstances

are only when the action of not going to war would cause more harm than war would cause.

Some Questions

1. Has there ever been a war which was justified both in cause and in action? WWII was fought to prevent Nazism. The Falkland's War was a clear violation of territory. Are these examples of just war?
2. Is enough done to prevent war? Apartheid South Africa was brought down through internal and external pressure, without resorting to War. Can policies such as sanctions, tariffs and boycotts subdue belligerent states without open war?
3. Do technological inventions affect the morality of war? Advances in artificial intelligence, biological and chemical warfare, and the potential for wars to be fought remotely using drones, etc, have changed the way wars are fought. Do changes in technology mean that war is less justifiable?

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