

Two concepts of ethics and war politics essay



Peace and war are two concepts generally bound together. We can rarely address one of these issues without addressing the other and the understanding of one of those two concepts increases the understanding of the other. This explains principally the choice of this topic: Ethics and War in a course entitled Peace and Culture.

Peace is defined by the Oxford dictionary (2010) as: “ a state or a period in which there are no war or war has ended”. For many, the word peace is merely the opposite of war and they tend to define peace from what it is not. But how can we talk of peace in countries where even though there is no war, people are deprived from freedom of choice and from participating in decisions that affect their own lives? Consequently, I agree with Johan Galtung (1999) on his distinction between positive and negative peace. Galtung defines negative peace as the absence of violence and positive peace as “ more than the absence of violence, the presence of social justice through equal opportunity, a fair distribution of power and resources, equal protection and impartial enforcement of law”. Thus the absence of war is just one aspect of peace and in the absence of mechanisms to promote positive peace, the negative peace may last just for a short period.

Now, we shall consider the definition of war. Like any social phenomenon, definitions are varied and generally, the proposed definition expresses the author’s broader political or philosophical ideology. Karl von Clausewitz defines war as “ the continuation of politics by other means”, and again as “ an act of violence intended to compel our opponents to fulfil our will” whereas, Denis Diderot comments that war is “ a convulsive and violent disease of the political body”.

Webster's dictionary defines war as a state of open and declared armed hostile conflict between states or nations. This definition captures the fact that war must be declared and is between states or nations, thus individuals' fight cannot be considered as a war. Nevertheless, this definition is narrow as, strictly talking about nations and states, it rejects civil war.

Furthermore, the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy defines war as an actual, intentional and widespread armed conflict between political communities. This definition brings out the fact that war should be an armed conflict presently existing, not merely potential or possible. Besides, by stating that political communities can wage war, it allows for civil war. Again, it brings about an extension of the definition of war which allows for war on terror. The weakness of this definition is that it does specifically state that a war must be declared by a competent authority of either political community.

There is no universally agreed definition of war; each definition of war having its strengths and its weaknesses. More central to the debate are the moral question that the concept of war raises: Is war right? Put in a different way: Is war ever justified? Or, can war be justified? As we shall see in the continuation of this essay, the way of setting this question already gives an insight of the author's ideology. The first one presupposes that war is just but it may sometimes be used pervasively and the second takes as fact that war is morally wrong but there may be situations when we can wage a war.

Ethics and war

There are many philosophical theories that relate to war. As previously said, one of the serious moral question war raises: Is war morally justifiable? All the philosophical theories on this topic can more or less fit into three categories:

Political Realism

Just War Theory

Pacifism

Political Realism

Political realism, simply referred to as realism, is a school of thinking in the international relations discipline. Though realism has many sub-categories, there are some common characteristics to all those sub-categories. Political realism attempts to define and prescribe national interest as the main motive in political relations. It has a strong doubt on the possible application of moral concepts such as justice, ethics... to international relations. The advocates of realism lay a great emphasis on power and security issues and believe that the international arena is a sort of anarchy.

Again, for the promoters of realism, the only parameter to take into consideration before waging a war is national interest. War is to be resorted to as long as national interest is concerned. This could be explained by the fact that they consider war as inevitable and they believe in the principle of the survival of the fittest. Only the interests of the fittest could be achieved and war is used to determine who is the fittest.

Realism theories' roots can be traced far in history, some of the classical realists being: Thucydides, Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes and Spinoza. Some modern realists are: Hans Morgenthau, George Kennan, Reinhold Niebuhr and Henry Kissinger. To this list we can also add neo-realists such as Kenneth Waltz.

A new manifestation of realism in the penultimate century came into the form of social Darwinism, whose adherents advocated that races, communities, groups were subject to the same laws of natural selection developed by Charles Darwin on animals and plants in nature. Like the realists, they advocated the fact that social and political growth was subject to the principle of survival of the fittest.

Realism could be separated in two branches:

Descriptive political realism

Prescriptive political realism

The distinction between those two forms of realism is based on the primary purpose of the theory. A theory will be classified as descriptive if its primary aim is to explain international relations or categorised as prescriptive if its primary purpose is to advise on how international relations should be dealt with.

Descriptive realism is the contention that nations or states either do not (are not motivated to) or cannot (because they are not able to) behave morally. It supports the idea that states lack the morality and justice sensitivity. It

argues again that states and individuals are different creations, thus we cannot apply the same rules and principles to both.

The main criticism to descriptive realism is that nations or states are ruled by humans who are animated in terms of morality and justice and even if those leaders are not, they are accountable to a population who is animated in terms of morality and justice. Again, the view that morality is not applied to international relations does not mean that it should not.

Prescriptive political realism claims that states should act amorally on the international arena in order to achieve their own interest. Its advocates argue that nations or states must pursue their own interest regardless of the actual condition of international relations. This theory has many obscured parts starting from what the national interest is claimed to be or the permissibility to employ any means as far as it takes one to his objectives. This could bring about a diversity of interpretations.

Some authors such as Plato and Aristotle have proposed economic and political self-sufficiency as the main national interest. If this is the case, then there is no need to go to war as this interest can be achieved by means other than war. One contemporary example to illustrate this is China.

As an illustration again, mercantilists have argued that the economic sufficiency of a nation can only be achieved at the expense of the others. Consequently, one should not bother about other nations as soon as national interest is achieved. In contrast, Adam Smith and David Ricardo have argued that economic interests of various nations could be achieved with a good organisation of world trade.

Are there always means other than war through which a state or a nation can achieve its interest and preserve its security?

Just War Theory

Just war (in Latin: *Justum bellum*) theory is a very famous perspective of ethics of war. In the recent years, the Invasion of Iraq has re-opened the debate on when war is permissible. This theory is somehow midway to political realism on one side and pacifism on the other side. It is primarily concerned with the rationalisation of why and how wars are fought. Put this way, one should not think that it encourages war, on the contrary, it prohibits law but allows for special circumstances under which a nation or a state has the right (not the obligation) to resort to armed conflicts. Before talking about the criteria that qualify war as a just war, we will briefly look at just war classics and advocates.

Just war theories can be traced far back in history, at least to Cicero. In its origin, just war is a combination of Greco-roman and Christian values. As classical and advocates, we can mention: Cicero, Aristotle, Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, Francisco de Vitoria, Francisco Suarez, Hugo Grotius and more recently, Immanuel Kant. Nowadays, most of the international conventions and charters, namely the United Nations Charter and the Hague and the Geneva Conventions, can find their ideological roots in just war theory.

The just war theory was primarily divided into two parts but more recently, we have witness the emergence of a third part:

Jus ad bellum: before the war, there are rules and criteria that determine when and under which circumstances a nation may wage a war

Jus in bellum: These rules are to be applied during the war. They cover the manner in which war should be conducted

Jus post bellum: when war terminates, how are peace agreements put in place and accountability and responsibility of warring parties assessed.

It is worth noting that a war is considered a just war only if it was permissible in the beginning, carried out following the rules and the post-war agreements put in place are fair to both parties. If one of these three steps is left out, then the war ceases to be a just war. In the continuation of this essay, we will use the Latin appellations of those fractions of just war.

Jus ad Bellum

The jus ad bellum are a set of requirements that need to be fulfilled before launching a war that is considered just. This means that they help to decide on whether to resort to a particular war or not. The criteria are: just cause, right intention, proper authority and public declaration, last resort, probability of success and proportionality. One can easily observe that the principles are neither wholly deontological (their rightness being determined by their intrinsic qualities), nor wholly teleological or consequentialist (their rightness being determined by their consequences). It is a careful mixture of both models.

Just Cause

First and foremost, there need be a justified reason before resorting to war. Self-defence is agreed by many theorists (except the absolute pacifists, as we will see later) as a just cause. The main consensus here is that the initiation of use of force is wrong and can justly be resisted. Many modern authors agree on self-defence from aggressors as a just cause and they also consider as just causes: correcting a wrong such as defence of others, protection of innocent lives and retribution for a wrong.

The main debate is based on the question: is pre-emptive strike allowed if there is a threat of aggression on a nation? Or, should the nation wait for an aggression to actually take place? We have two main responses to this question, the first being that you should wait for the aggression to actually take place. The justification for this being you cannot punish someone for what he has not yet done. The second view is less strict as it allows for pre-emptive strikes only on the ground that there is serious evidence of an aggression. This was the view applied by the United States of America on the bombing of Iraq. Pre-emptive strikes will be eliminated by just war theory as a just cause this because it may give room for many to wage just wars under the fallacious pretext of serious threat.

Right Intention

This criterion may sometimes be confused with just cause. Despite the fact that they go towards the same direction, there are not totally similar. This criterion is concerned with the motives of waging the war. To illustrate this, a state A may be attacked by another state B. A has a just cause of resorting to war but can have other motives such as self-interest, demonstrating

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national power and may not resort to war solely for the purpose of justice. This cannot be considered a just war because of the intentions behind the resort to war. Thus a nation should solely be motivated by its just cause; grudges and self-interest rejected as just causes.

Proper Authority and Public Declaration

The war has to be lawfully declared to be a just war, this means declared by the appropriate authority of the state or nation (government, monarch...), following the appropriate procedure as stated by the international and national laws. Again, the war has to be made public both to the citizens of the said nation and the enemy state(s) or nation(s). Practically and sometimes there are reasonable uncertainties on which of two governments is the legitimate government of a country. This happens in cases whereby a previous government has been overthrown unconstitutionally. This situation can bring about serious difficulties in determining who is legitimate to declare a war.

In recent years, there have been some arguments in favour of the United Nations as a lawful authority to declare a war, for the reason that it is actually the supreme authority in the world. Again from a strict legal point of view and according to Article 2. 4 of the Charter, the member gave up their right to wage war. This article states that: “ all Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations”. Practically, the UN does not declare wars, though there have been some cases of lawful authorisation (in the case the United States of America to take action in <https://assignbuster.com/two-concepts-of-ethics-and-war-politics-essay/>

Afghanistan under the right of self defence). The actual power to declare war resides with the individual states and not with the United Nations.

Last Resort

A just war is waged only as a last resort, when other plausible non-violent alternatives are exhausted. Other alternatives include diplomacy, economic and financial sanctions, United Nations condemnation, etc... It is often said that violence breeds more violence and it is less expensive to prevent a war than to try to stop it when it has started. The sovereignty to decide if all other means are exhausted is left to the states but the United Nations prolongs diplomatic negotiation even when it seems all alternatives are exhausted.

Some writers have argued that the word last in the phrase last resort does not refer to a sequence of time. Instead, they believe it means war should be the least preferred action. This argument is quite similar to the other and somehow they mean the same thing.

Probability of Success

This principle follows the consequentialist model. A nation should go into a war where it has a just cause, the right intention and upon all a probability of success. This to avoid futile and useless armed conflicts but this is often seen as a bias against small nations or states, as they do not always have probabilities of success and implicitly cannot wage a war even in the case of self-defence.

Proportionality

The final criterion of jus ad bellum is that prior to declaring the war, a state should weigh the expected return of the war against the loss or casualties that will occur. The war should be declared only if the expected return from the war is worth the resulting casualties.

The use of both deontological and teleological models increases the flexibility of those principles but simultaneously opens the door to different interpretations because of the lack of strict ethical framework.

Jus in Bello

Jus in bello refers to justice in war. It indicates how just wars ought to be fought, that is how war should be conducted. These rules seek to limit the destructiveness of war once it has started. It is principally addressed to military authorities as they make the decisions in times of war.

Jus in bello (how war are to be fought) is dissociated from Jus ad bellum (why and when wars can be fought). This has the obvious implication that a just cause can be unjust in the way it is fought and there can be a just conduct of war for an unjust cause. To illustrate this, history has traces of a country that retaliated for the invasion of an uninhabited island by destroying enemy cities with a nuclear weapon. The cause was just but the battle fought in an unjust way.

Jus in bello has many rules some of which are: discrimination, proportionality, obey the international laws on weapons prohibition and benevolent quarantine for prisoners of war. We shall concentrate on the first two.

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Discrimination

This answers the question: who is it ethical to fight? It is widely agreed that non-combatants or civilians should not be the targets of war attacks. But as concerning the combatants, is it ethical to kill them? Some authors argue that because of the fact that they have received military training, are armed and are voluntarily enrolled in army, they can be targets.

Proportionality

This principle deals with the question: how much force is ethically permissible? It states that the force used should be proportional to the desired aim. The determination of whether the magnitude of force used is proportional to the desired aim is left to the belligerent.

Jus post Bellum

Jus post bellum seeks to facilitate the transition from a period of war to a period of peace. The advocates of jus post bellum have set as rules that: the peace agreement should be fair to both parties and publicly declared, punishment should be proportionate to the destructiveness and not be imposed on non-combatants or civilians and financial restitution in the case of a compensatory claim must be in line with the proportionality and discrimination principles stated above.

Pacifism

Broadly speaking, pacifism is a school of thinking in which the main contention is that peace rather than violence can and should govern international relations. Some authors have identified three main reasons why people stand behind pacifism: religious motives, non-religious motives of

sacredness of life and the pragmatic belief that war is ever destructive and wasteful.

Depending on the criterion used, we can split pacifism into various categories. Using doctrines as a criterion, we will have absolute pacifism and more flexible doctrines of pacifism. Whereas taking into consideration justifications of the doctrine, we will have deontological pacifism and teleological pacifism. The deontological position claims that as moral agents, we have the duty not to resort to violence and states not to resort to war. Meanwhile, the teleological position (also called intrinsic or consequentialist) advocates that no good can ever be derived from violence or war. If any good is derived, the evil produced by war will prevail over it.

Absolute Pacifism

Absolute pacifism promotes the idea that war is never right; no reason can be used to justify a resort to war, not even self-defence.

Deontological Absolute Pacifism

This doctrine states that it is a duty for a nation or a state never to aggress another, use force, to support a nation that is waging or to wage a war against another nation or state. The main advocates of this doctrine are religious pacifist. They believe that war should not be resorted even when the lives of innocent citizens are at stake. This could be explained by the fact that they also believe in a better life in the realms beyond and thus they value less this life.

Teleological Absolute Pacifism

This doctrine advocates that if any good is derived from the use of violence and war, it will be outweighed by the evil caused by the war. Therefore war should never be resorted to. Similar to the deontological view, they promote the total prohibition of war. Conversely, their justification is not that it is a duty not to resort to war, instead it is because of the consequences of war that are always negative. It is difficult to build arguments on this theory as the good derived depends on one's perception.

Conditional Pacifism

Conditional Pacifists are against the total prohibition of wars, rather, they promote the idea that war could be allowed under certain circumstances.

Deontological Conditional Pacifism

For deontological conditional pacifists, the duty not to wage war is not the only duty of moral beings. The duty to protect innocent lives may prevail over that of not resorting to war.

Consequentialist Conditional Pacifism

They advocate that all moral rules depend on circumstances. The specific outcome of each act, battle, war... should be examined and the expected return assessed. Specific cases such as self-defence or wars to protect innocent lives are acceptable. It is worth noting that the more we allow for special circumstances in pacifism, the closer we get to just war theory.

Other forms of Pacifism

Other forms of pacifism include:

Defencism: This theory accepts all forms of defence wars as just

Pacifism: Pacifists prefer peaceful conditions to war but permit some wars if they contribute to the cause of peace.

Conclusion

To the question on whether war is right, a wide-range of theories attempt to bring an answer, each theory or sub-theory presenting its strengths and its weaknesses. There are enough theories to fit anyone's taste. To adhere to one middle-range theory (Just war theory and flexible pacifism) is tricky as the boundary between them is so narrow. More difficult nowadays is to adhere to absolute pacifism as absolute pacifists are seen as utopians or idealists. This can be explained by the fact that it becomes harder to visualise a world without war. Can war ever be completely eradicated?