Just war theory

DEFINITION: Primarily Christian philosophy offering criteria for determining when it is just to wage war and how wars should be fought

TYPE OF ETHICS: Military ethics

SIGNIFICANCE: Just war theory attempts to prevent and limit wars by providing universal guidelines for ethically correct ways to resolve conflicts between states.

Moral considerations in the conduct of war can be found in the earliest records of warfare. The first systematic attempt to set forth universal rules of warfare—based on natural law—was proposed by the Roman statesman Cicero during the first century B.C.E. During the fourth century C.E. the North African theologian St. Augustine agreed that morality was “written in the heart” and synthesized rational and biblical arguments for reconciling the evil of killing with the demands for peace and justice. The thirteenth century theologian St. Thomas Aquinas summarized the classic rationale for declaring war and articulated moral guidelines for conduct in war. Building upon this philosophical tradition, Hugo Grotius published the first comprehensive exposition of international law in 1625, providing the foundation for subsequent international agreements to limit warfare, such as the modern Geneva Conventions. By the early twenty-first century, the just war tradition had evolved into a theory resting on a few core principles.

Thomas Aquinas identified three reasons for justifying going to war. First, and most important, there must be a just cause. The principal idea here is that there are times when certain injustices, such as unprovoked attacks or human rights violations, are so egregious that to not go to war would be a greater evil. Second, only the proper authority—states, not individuals—can declare war. Third, just wars are waged only with right intentions, such as the desire for just peace or promoting a greater good.

Three other bases for a just war have been added to those articulated by Thomas Aquinas. First, in order not to waste lives recklessly, a war should have a reasonable chance of success. Second, the principle of proportionality should apply; it states that the harm caused by war should not exceed the harm that provokes it. Finally, war should be a last resort, taken only when nonviolent means fail.

ACCEPTABLE CONDUCT IN WAR

The numerous guidelines for acceptable conduct in war can be grouped into two basic categories. The principle of discrimination specifies the legitimate targets of war and provides guidelines for the proper treatment of noncombatants and the defenseless. Pertinent to this principle, the “doctrine of double effect” states that killing civilians is excusable if military action against a genuine military target leads to unavoidable civilian loss—so-called “collateral damage”—and civilians themselves are not specifically targeted. The second major principle is a second kind of proportionality. The general idea here is to minimize destruction and suffering, especially by limiting the types of weapons used.

Just war theory holds that only wars fought for proper reasons and waged in the right way are just. Satisfying these criteria, however, is rarely clear-cut. Perhaps the best that just war theory can offer is to determine the degree to which any given war is just.

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FURTHER READING


SEE ALSO: Augustine, Saint; Conscientious objection; Grotius, Hugo; Holy war; Jihad; Limited war; Military ethics; Peacekeeping missions; Realpolitik; War.