

A Philosophical Critique of Warfare in the Contemporary Era: ethical justifications and competing theories

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to provide a comprehensive philosophical critique of warfare in the contemporary era, focusing on ethical justifications and competing theoretical frameworks. It examines the extent to which classical just war theory remains applicable and explores how contemporary philosophers contribute to the redefinition of the ethics of war. Employing an applied, descriptive-analytical, qualitative approach, the study gathers data from library sources, theoretical literature, previous research, and scholarly articles. It reviews such sources to critically analyze the philosophical and ethical foundations of war. The findings show that states resort to war for reasons including the defense of human rights, protection of sovereignty, and response to significant threats. Just war theory distinguishes between conflicts that are ethically justified and those that are not. Although ethical principles invariably influence warfare, some conflicts can be justified on grounds of justice, rendering absolute pacifism impractical. Also the analysis reveals that classical frameworks, while foundational, are insufficient for addressing the moral complexities of contemporary warfare. Emerging forms of conflict challenge traditional notions of legitimacy and moral accountability, highlighting significant gaps in existing theories. Contemporary warfare necessitates a revised and integrative philosophical framework capable of accommodating new modes of violence and global security concerns. Such a framework should synthesize insights from just war theory, pacifism, and political realism to provide a robust basis for evaluating the morality of modern conflicts and international bodies must prioritize disarmament and ethically based legislation to safeguard human rights and dignity.

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Intruduction

The study of war dates back over two thousand years, beginning with Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War. Scholars and philosophers have long sought to understand the nature of war to manage current conflicts and prevent future ones, raising questions such as whether war is necessary and morally justifiable (Orji, 2023). War is a complex outcome of human choices, often grounded in misguided assumptions, leading to devastating consequences. Once initiated, wars are difficult to reverse, highlighting the importance of prevention and proactive measures (Pessaros & Ryan, 2023; Clausewitz, 1984). Understanding the ethical and philosophical dimensions of war is essential for informed policymaking and global peace efforts. Preventing or mitigating war requires robust ethical principles and legal norms, as warfare is inherently destructive and should be avoided whenever possible (Babic, 2023; Okokocho, 2024).

Historical narratives show that war is a complex phenomenon rooted in economic, political, and psychological factors. Theories of war causes differ: Thucydides (1954) attributed the Peloponnesian War to Athens' fear of Sparta's growing power, while Kegan (1995) emphasized military weakness and inadequate peacetime governance as primary causes. Others argue war is inherent to human nature, driven by survival instincts. Any moral justification for war must meet strict ethical criteria, such as self-defense, protection of lives, sovereignty, or national borders, assessed through ethical intent. The principle of "right intention" in just war theory requires decisions based on ethical and altruistic motivations (Gonsalves, 1985). No state should force citizens into immoral acts, and individuals have the right to abstain from unjust wars. Leadership and decision-makers' competence are crucial for ethical warfare. Overall, wars result from the interplay of historical, political, and psychological factors (Orji, 2023).

In the contemporary era, the philosophy of war has been significantly reconfigured, moving beyond classical legacies of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, or Thomas Aquinas. Modern debates are shaped by the World Wars' destructiveness, Cold War confrontations, postcolonial challenges, proxy wars, terrorism, and new military and digital technologies. Philosophers now consider war not only as a political or military phenomenon but as a moral, legal, ideological, and media-constructed reality, reflecting concerns about human dignity, global justice, and lasting peace (Palmer & Perkins, 2002). Examining philosophical and ethical dimensions of war informs moral judgments on participation, legitimacy, and necessity, guiding just and humane international policies (Okokocho, 2024).

Three dominant approaches—pacifism, realism, and just war theory—frame contemporary discussions. Just war theory permits war under strict ethical conditions, such as self-defense or protection of justice, with limitations on objectives and respect for human rights. Pacifism argues for avoiding war and resolving disputes peacefully, except in extreme emergencies, viewing all war as inherently immoral (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2024). Realism prioritizes power, national interest, and security over ethical deliberation, basing decisions on practical and strategic calculations. These divergent perspectives highlight the role of ethics in wartime decision-making and the tensions among moral, philosophical, and strategic considerations. Lackey (1994) emphasizes that war is only justifiable when it fully meets ethical criteria, including justice, human rights, and the common good; pacifists argue that any reliance on force risks flawed humanitarianism and undermines legitimacy (Lackey, 1994).

Just war theory, developed by philosophers such as Michael Walzer, provides a framework for evaluating the legitimacy of initiating war (*jus ad bellum*) and the ethical conduct of warfare (*jus in*

bello) (Walzer, 2015). Walzer stresses that justice in war is essential both for determining legitimacy and guiding military conduct, as failure to uphold these principles can cause serious ethical and humanitarian crises. Contemporary philosopher Jeff McMahan highlights that modern warfare complicates this distinction, emphasizing ethical evaluation based on individual and collective responsibility, motives, and consequences in an era of advanced technologies (McMahan, 2009). Brian Orend underscores the centrality of humanitarian principles in military decisions, asserting that respecting civilian rights and minimizing harm are fundamental, even in legitimate wars (Orend, 2006).

Philosophical and ethical concerns regarding the motivations for and justifications of war are increasingly urgent. Barry (2011) notes that harsh punishments for acts like premeditated murder reflect not only direct harm to victims but also broader societal suffering. This underscores the dangers of ignoring ethics in wartime decision-making, whether for personal gain or self-serving misinterpretations of morality. Barry identifies several factors contributing to unjust wars: decision-makers knowingly disregarding ethical standards for personal or political interests; unconscious moral reasoning that aligns with self-interest; and lack of reflection or moral willpower, leading to conflict based on shallow reasoning or fleeting impulses (Barry, 2011).

These dynamics form the core philosophical rationale behind unjust wars. The primary concern is the erosion of ethical principles in war-related decisions, as combatants often believe their actions are morally justified. When misguided moral reasoning endangers ethics and humanity, reassessing the legitimacy of war philosophically becomes imperative. This study critically examines how competing theories—just war theory, pacifism, and political realism—interact amid technological, political, and ethical transformations. Engaging with philosophers such as Michael Walzer, Jeff McMahan, and Brian Orend, it demonstrates that traditional frameworks like classical just war theory are insufficient for addressing moral complexities in modern conflicts, including proxy wars, cyber warfare, and AI in military operations. Contemporary conflicts challenge traditional justifications and call for an integrative philosophical framework capable of addressing ethical challenges. This study is guided by two research questions: To what extent can the classical just war tradition provide an adequate moral foundation for assessing contemporary conflicts, and how do contemporary philosophers contribute to rethinking the ethics of war?

1. Literature Review

Any meaningful discussion of the ethics of war must begin with an understanding of war itself, as analyzing the moral dimensions of war requires a thorough comprehension of its dynamic nature. According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2024), war is defined as a deliberate, organized, and large-scale armed conflict that takes place between political communities—either established states or entities seeking statehood. While classical wars occur between sovereign states, non-state actors such as terrorist groups may also engage in warfare, especially when driven by political objectives or aspirations for territorial control. For a conflict to be classified as war, it must be intentional, real, and extensive, since war is a conscious act requiring the mobilization and significant use of armed forces and weaponry. Anyam (2011) describes war as the use of force or violence to compel an enemy to submit to the will of the attacker, or as a condition of armed conflict between two or more nations, achieved through the application of military power (Anyam, 2011: 64). Additionally, war may be defined as the organized use of violence to kill, destroy property, and force submission, typically in pursuit of political, social, or religious goals. In this context, Carl von

Clausewitz characterizes war as “an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will,” emphasizing that war is an interactive clash of opposing wills, where success depends on who can impose their will more effectively (Clausewitz, 1984). In modern times, interpretations of concepts like “holy war” and *jihad* have evolved significantly, distancing themselves from their medieval associations with bloodshed and religious violence. For example, the term “crusade,” once a symbol of religious warfare against non-believers, has come to represent passionate and reformist movements aimed at correcting injustices or supporting specific ideals (Randall, 2007). Robertson (2006) argues that wars do not occur solely on battlefields; rather, they are deeply intertwined with social and cultural interactions. Cultural differences and collective goals often influence how military actions are carried out and what objectives are pursued during armed conflicts (Snyder, 2006:38). From a philosophical and ethical standpoint, diverse views of war reflect its role as a means for asserting power, protecting economic interests, and preserving a nation's political or economic independence (Orji, 2023). While some scholars consider World War II to be morally justified, pacifists reject this interpretation due to their opposition to the use of violence. The “Just War” theory, which traces back to Aristotle, attempts to evaluate the legitimacy of warfare based on ethical criteria (Gabriel Kofi Akpah, 2019:64). Gonsalves (1985) considers war a manifestation of humanity's social failure. Despite its catastrophic consequences, people still resort to war out of envy, hatred, and ambition—revealing the deeply human nature of conflict. He poses a fundamental question: “should nations remain passive in the face of aggression, or do they have the right to self-defense?” The Just War theory, while grounded in a fundamental aversion to violence, offers moral justification for the use of force under specific conditions and carefully examines the motives and context of conflict. This theory highlights the distinctions among pacifist, realist, and moralist perspectives. According to the tradition of Thomas Aquinas, three conditions must be met for a war to be considered just: a formal declaration of war by a legitimate authority, a just cause, and right intention. The primary goal of Just War theory is to determine whether entering a war is ethically and legally justifiable, and to distinguish between revenge and justice (Orji, 2023). Lackey (1994) emphasizes that the theory hinges on a clear contrast between just and unjust, and aims to identify which party is morally right or wrong—a critical aspect in understanding the ethics and legitimacy of warfare. Various perspectives on the moral justification of war exist. Both pacifism and realism acknowledge a fundamental gap between ethics and war. Pacifism, as a philosophical view, inherently opposes any moral justification for war, arguing that the violence and destruction it entails nullify its ethical legitimacy. Pacifism is divided into two categories: *Absolute pacifism, which categorically rejects all forms of violence and justification for war*, and *Conditional pacifism, which may accept the moral permissibility of war under extremely rare circumstances, yet holds that most modern wars are ethically indefensible (Fiala, 2006). Within this framework, conditional pacifism overlaps with Just War theory, as both accept that warfare may be morally justified only when stringent conditions are met.

However, identifying one party in a war as “just” does not imply the other is inherently unjust; both sides may engage in unethical actions. Gonsalves (1985) stresses that even a just war may be fought unjustly, while an unjust war may, in rare cases, be waged in adherence to moral and legal principles. The distinction between morally justified wars and those that violate human values is encapsulated in three core principles of Just War theory: Legitimacy of war declaration, moral intention, and adherence to human norms and limitations during conflict. This analytical framework allows for a deeper understanding of the ethical crises inherent in war and helps determine when a

conflict may be partially justifiable and when it is entirely immoral and illegitimate (*Gonsalves, 1985:527*)

2. Domestic Studies

Many domestic philosophical and ethical studies have examined “just war,” “ethics of war,” and “philosophy of war,” critically analyzing perspectives of Islamic, Iranian, and Western thinkers. Ibn Khaldun is regarded as the first Muslim thinker to analyze war sociologically and anthropologically. He views war as a natural aspect of human relations, distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate wars and primitive from civilized societies. Wars driven by primitive values are illegitimate, while those promoting civil order are legitimate. Illegitimate wars stem from human excesses and the pursuit of power, whereas legitimate wars relate to tribal solidarity (*asabiyyat*), social order, and expansion of religious beliefs. He also acknowledges realistic factors, like military strength, and contingent factors, such as fortune and secrecy, in shaping war dynamics (*Tavana & etal, 2019*). Al-Farabi is considered a principal philosopher of war in Islamic civilization. He was neither fully opposed to war nor affirmed its inherent necessity. His theory, grounded in virtue ethics, links war to the broader philosophy of happiness (*sa’adat*). A just war aims at achieving true happiness, while an unjust war obstructs it. Wars pursued solely for conflict and conquest are vices, whereas wars to secure and preserve virtuous deeds are virtues. The legitimacy of war depends on combatants’ intentions to realize justice and virtue, situating Al-Farabi’s perspective within teleological ethics, where the end justifies the war, and means are secondary (*Emami Koopae, 2021*). One of the other study critically engages with Michael Walzer’s just war theory, treating it as a normative framework designed to justify and regulate the phenomenon of war. The author believes Walzer, employing a historical methodology and a conventional interpretation of just war ethics grounded in Hegelian assumptions, seeks to provide a realist justification for war and the rules governing its conduct. However, through content analysis, the article demonstrates that the modern formulation of just war theory, owing to its Hegelian foundations in both assumptions and methodology, suffers from significant moral shortcomings and ultimately reflects a form of legal positivism (*Khademi & etal, 2025*). Grounded in his conception of human nature—a view that resonates with the realist tradition—Allameh Tabataba’i regards war as a natural, inherent, and ultimately inevitable phenomenon. He interprets the Qur’anic injunction of jihad as an unconditional mandate for military preparedness, emphasizing that the attainment of maximum readiness to confront and expel adversaries, and to safeguard society against external threats, constitutes a fundamental and indispensable obligation (*Tabatabaei, 2014: 114-116*). Morteza Motahari does not view war as inherently negative, considering it an inevitable aspect of human life. Wars for territorial expansion, material gain, or racial motives are aggressive and condemned, while wars confronting oppressors or repelling oppression are legitimate and aligned with human nature. Motahari frames jihad as disciplinary, defensive, and deterrent. The legitimacy of war depends on underlying intention and purpose, not merely the use of force (*Motahari, 1994: 15*). Motahari’s conception of war is grounded in a moral and ideological framework. Imam Khomeini, Allameh Tabataba’i, and Motahari agree on the legitimacy of defensive war but differ in their underlying frameworks. Khomeini bases his view on divine anthropology, limiting war to defensive purposes under ethical and humanitarian constraints. Tabataba’i, using a realist view of human nature, sees war as natural and justified for security and societal protection, emphasizing constant preparedness. Motahari adopts a moral–teleological perspective, asserting that war’s legitimacy depends on intention: wars for justice and defense are

legitimate, while those for greed or conquest are unjust. Collectively, they illustrate three strands in Islamic philosophy of war: theological–anthropological, realist–defensive, and ethical–teleological. Studies on ethics and war in Islam highlight the Prophet Muhammad’s adherence to ethical standards such as compassion, loyalty, and patience during warfare, countering Orientalist portrayals of Islamic battles as inherently violent (Abedi & etal, 2023). Similarly, the other study described the ethical model of warfare in the Prophet’s conduct as a blend of guidance, human dignity, and divine satisfaction—incorporating principles like humane treatment of prisoners and environmental protection (Aghaei,2023). Nahj al-Balagha has been used as a primary source to critically analyze just war theory, particularly regarding psychological and media warfare (Morovati, & etal 2022). Together, these studies underscore that concepts such as ethics, justice, legitimacy, and future-oriented strategic planning are essential and multilayered dimensions of philosophical and ethical analyses of war, playing a crucial role in evaluating the justification of armed conflicts.

3. International Review

Michael Walzer (2008), a proponent of just war theory, emphasizes protecting individual and societal security. His theory categorizes war ethics into three dimensions: pre-war ethics (just cause, moral intent, likelihood of success, exhausting diplomatic/economic alternatives), ethics during war (distinction between combatants and non-combatants, moral conduct, avoiding indiscriminate/excessive violence), and post-war ethics (justice, compensation, prevention of future aggression). This tripartite framework evaluates the initiation, conduct, and aftermath of war based on ethical principles (Karim, Wahhab, & Abboud, 2023). In contrast, Jeff McMahan (2009) argues that the ethical rules of war differ from those governing individual defense and are not justified solely by righteous intentions or goals. He challenges the assumption that all combatants have equal moral status, asserting that the morality of killing depends on one’s role and the justice of the cause (McMahan, 2009, 26). Soldiers fighting for an unjust cause do not have the same moral protections as those defending justly, revising traditional *jus in bello* reasoning. McMahan distinguishes between just and unjust combatants, emphasizing that moral responsibility persists regardless of institutional affiliation; following orders does not absolve one from ethical accountability for aggression (McMahan, 2009, 75-89). Babic (2023), in his article on the ethics and spirit of war, acknowledged that while war appears morally unjustifiable, it remains an inherent part of human reality. He emphasized the need to understand the structure and logic of war, its societal impacts, and the importance of critical reflection on its consequences. His goal was to foster a deeper and more valid understanding of war’s concept. Alexander Moseley (2002) conceptualizes war as a philosophical phenomenon, emphasizing that its analysis must include ontological, epistemological, and cultural dimensions, not just moral considerations. Philosophical systems indirectly shape policymakers’ decisions, making philosophical understanding essential for comprehending conflict and peace. War is rooted in human culture and thought, and its cessation requires transforming beliefs that justify it. While biological instincts play a role, war primarily results from human choices, values, and beliefs, manifested in social practices, habits, and implicit actions (Moseley, 2002, 8). He defines war as a “collective, organized conflict with an open-ended conclusion,” excluding individual violence and riots (Moseley, 2002, 14). Moseley also presents a sixfold typology—animal/instinctive, primitive, civilized/political, modern, nuclear, and postmodern war—illustrating war’s evolution from survival behavior to culturally embedded, value-laden, and institutionally organized practices (Moseley, 2002, 25). Beddingfield (2023) explored the roots of

just war theory, highlighting the influence of biblical texts and varying justifications—including Russia’s use of Eurasian philosophy to rationalize its invasion of Ukraine. Her findings showed that civilian casualties in Ukraine have reached nearly 10,000 deaths and 1,600 injuries, emphasizing the difficulty of separating justifications of war from religious doctrines like Christianity. She noted that just war theory has been shaped by both philosophical interpretations and institutional frameworks of the church. [Helen Frowe \(2022\)](#) analyzes the moral dimensions of warfare within Just War Theory, focusing on *jus ad bellum*, *jus in bello*, and *jus post bellum* ([Frowe, 2022, 45-72](#)). She contends that wars are morally permissible only under strict conditions, and legitimacy depends on adherence to moral constraints, not just political or strategic goals ([Frowe, 2022, 80](#)). Frowe also addresses ethical justification for defensive killing, allowing lethal force in self-defense or defense of others when proportionate and necessary ([Frowe, 2022,132](#)). [Johnson \(2011\)](#) argued that just war theory, initially grounded in biased and often hypocritical standards, has evolved in the 21st century under the influence of rule of law and universal norms. However, this evolution has also opened the door to ambiguous interpretations and potential misuse. ([Johnson, 2011:77](#)). In his 2023 commentary “The Dark Side of Neutrality,” [Slavoj Žižek](#) criticizes so-called neutral stances in contemporary conflicts, arguing that neutrality often supports aggressors. He notes that in wars like Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, professed impartiality legitimizes imperialism and power domination ([Žižek, 2023](#)). Žižek emphasizes the ethical responsibility of states and individuals, challenging moral detachment. He also contends that post-9/11 wars serve to maintain global capitalist order and Western hegemony, with perceived threats often constructed to justify large-scale interventions and human rights violations, especially in Islamic countries ([Žižek, 2002, 120](#)). [Ogunkoya \(2010\)](#), reflecting on the causes and ethical justifications of war, warned against the dangers of advanced technologies in modern warfare. He argued that with technological progress, humanity now faces existential threats capable of annihilating the planet. He advocated for a deep and ethics-centered examination of contemporary warfare, marked by both technical and moral complexity. [Brian Orend \(2006\)](#) argues that the morality of war must encompass the full conflict cycle. He identifies three dimensions: *jus ad bellum*, governing morally justified entry into war (just cause, legitimate authority, right intention, proportionality, reasonable chance of success, last resort) ([Orend, 2006, 31–35](#)); *jus in bello*, regulating conduct during war, emphasizing discrimination and proportionality ([Orend, 2006, 59](#)); and *jus post bellum*, justice after war, focusing on sustainable peace, reconstruction, human dignity, and accountability for war crimes ([Orend, 2006, 167](#)). This comprehensive framework allows for nuanced ethical evaluation of contemporary conflicts. [Tony Coady \(2008\)](#) examines the application of traditional Just War Theory to contemporary conflicts, highlighting its strengths and limitations. He emphasizes that moral evaluation must consider *jus ad bellum*, *jus in bello*, and the broader political and social contexts shaping ethical considerations ([Coady, 2008, 23–40](#)). Regarding *jus in bello*, combatants have a moral duty to discriminate between civilians and combatants and use proportional force, as violations undermine both the ethical legitimacy of actions and the broader credibility of the conflict ([Coady, 2008, 85](#)). [John Rawls \(1999\)](#) in “The Law of Peoples”, argues that war is morally justified only for defensive necessity, protecting peoples’ basic rights and freedoms against external aggression ([Rawls, 1999, 90](#)). Even in defensive conflicts, the protection of non-combatants and limits on widespread destruction are essential, with deliberate attacks on civilians or genocide never permissible ([Rawls, 1999:94–96](#)). He also emphasizes post-conflict justice, advocating fair reconstruction through international institutions and guidance from morally responsible “peoples” ([Rawls, 1999:113](#)). [Rengger \(2002\)](#)

asserted that although it may seem possible to rely on traditional ethical frameworks—such as those used during Cold War deterrence—the concept of “just war” has significantly evolved by the end of the twentieth century. It has become increasingly secular, influenced by liberal ideologies, and embedded within international legal frameworks. He pointed to targeted military operations, such as those in Yemen, as examples of the moral and legal complexities of contemporary conflicts. Rengger raised concerns about how advanced military technologies enable states to pursue prolonged warfare under the guise of “just war.” Booth (2000) similarly warned that some states exploit the just war framework to rationalize aggressive behavior, potentially prolonging conflicts and misusing the concept.

4. Research Methodology

This study is applied research that employs a descriptive–analytical approach and uses a qualitative methodology. Data collection was conducted through library-based resources. By reviewing the theoretical literature, examining previous research, and gathering data from scholarly books and articles related to war theories and their philosophical and ethical justifications, the study attempts to critically analyze these concepts. Primarily grounded in library research, this study involved the collection and analysis of both primary and secondary academic works on the theory of war, its philosophical reasoning, and ethical evaluations. The approach aimed is critical evaluation to identify gaps in classical frameworks and to propose an integrative philosophical approach capable of addressing the moral complexities of modern conflicts, including proxy wars, cyber operations, and the use of autonomous systems.

5. Findings

This study was conducted with the aim of critically and philosophically analyzing the phenomenon of war and assessing the various theories that attempt to justify it from an ethical and philosophical standpoint. The findings reveal that multiple factors—such as defending political independence, protecting human rights, and responding to serious security threats—are among the key motivations behind states' engagement in war. The results are consistent with the findings of both Iranian and international scholars, including, Allameh Tabataba’I, Motahari, Jeff McMahan(2009), John Rawls (1999), Tony Coady (2008), Brian Orend (2006), Slavoj Žižek, Helen Frowe(2022), Alexander Moseley (2002)and Michael Walzer (2008).

These studies reveal a recurring pattern in morally justifying wars based on ethical principles. However, the question of war’s legitimacy remains one of the most challenging issues in moral philosophy and political thought—from classical Greek philosophy to the present day. The literature identifies three dominant theoretical approaches:

- Realism: This view asserts that moral considerations have no place in warfare. Instead, national interests, state survival, and strategic necessities determine the legitimacy of war.
- Pacifism: From an ethical perspective, pacifism rejects all forms of military violence and advocates for absolute nonviolence in all circumstances.
- Just War Theory: This theory attempts to distinguish between morally justified and unjustified wars, offering frameworks for ethical evaluation both for the decision to go to war and for conduct during warfare.

According to the analysis, neither a complete denial of the moral dimension of war nor absolute pacifism is entirely defensible. In some cases—such as resisting blatant aggression or protecting innocent civilians—war may be deemed morally justified.

In Islamic thought, the concept of *Just War* closely aligns with moral and justice-based principles. Within this framework, legitimate grounds for war include self-defense, protection of national sovereignty, pursuit of justice, defense of the oppressed, and efforts to establish peace and global security. Emphasis is also placed on principles such as necessity, proportionality, likelihood of success, and the prior exhaustion of peaceful alternatives—all of which are core components of the theory.

Overall, the ethical and philosophical justifications of war revolve around themes such as defense, justice, independence, peace building, and the minimization of violence. Despite the theoretical coherence of some of these approaches, they often face significant practical challenges—such as defining the boundaries of legitimacy, deviation from declared objectives, and dealing with the human and social consequences of war. Therefore, any war that lacks clear ethical criteria—except in cases like defense against direct aggression or protection of innocent civilians—should be considered morally unjustifiable. As a result, participation in unjust wars is not only ethically indefensible but also constitutes a form of complicity in injustice. Those who oppose violence on rational and moral grounds are thus ethically obligated to abstain from involvement in such conflicts.

6. Discussion

The question of the moral legitimacy of war has long been a central concern for philosophers throughout the history of philosophy, particularly from ancient Greece to the present. The relationship between war and ethics has been the subject of ongoing debate among philosophers and political theorists, leading to the emergence of two main approaches: one asserts a fundamental connection between war and morality, while the other denies any ethical relevance in the context of warfare. These two approaches have given rise to three well-known theories in the ethics of war: realism, pacifism, and the just war theory.

Realism views war as existing outside the domain of ethics, with national interest as the sole criterion of legitimacy. In contrast, pacifism holds that war, under any circumstance, is morally impermissible. The just war theory, however, aims to provide criteria for distinguishing morally justified wars from unjust ones. It relies on principles such as necessity, proportionality, right intention, probability of success, and the exhaustion of peaceful alternatives before resorting to armed conflict.

The findings of this study show that governments may resort to war in response to factors such as defending political sovereignty, confronting serious threats, or supporting human rights. Therefore, it is essential to establish clear and binding moral principles—both nationally and internationally—for preventing, regulating, and limiting military violence. As [Okocha \(2024\)](#) emphasizes, war ethics plays a decisive role in reducing the intensity of violence and promoting non-violent solutions.

Historical and philosophical investigations confirm that war is a multi-causal and complex phenomenon. For instance, Thucydides attributed the Peloponnesian War to Athens' fear of Spartan power, while [Kagan \(1995\)](#) emphasized the failure of peacekeeping and deterrence. On a psychological level, some theories trace the roots of hostility and the desire for domination to human nature. Nonetheless, any ethical justification for initiating war must be based on legitimate defense,

the protection of the oppressed, and the pursuit of justice; the initiators' intentions must be sincere and benevolent (Gonsalves, 1985, 522).

In this context, the moral competence of leaders, the legitimacy of political decision-making, and the right of citizens to conscientious objection in unjust wars are key issues in the ethics of war. Some scholars, such as Stevens (1989), argue that beyond defense, wars have also served to foster social cohesion, enhance internal unity, and raise collective awareness. Confrontation with external enemies, he suggests, can focus internal hostilities toward a common target and thereby strengthen domestic solidarity. Philosophy plays a critical role in analyzing values and offering ethical frameworks to navigate war—both theoretically and practically. As Palmer and Perkins (2002) note, philosophy, by providing conceptual tools, can help clarify ethical standards and improve political decision-making concerning war and peace. From this perspective, just war theory, realism, and pacifism form three complementary or competing approaches that each emphasize different aspects of war's moral legitimacy (Palmer & Perkins, 2002, 211).

Ultimately, the evaluation of war's legitimacy requires a comprehensive philosophical, ethical, political, and historical analysis. Dialogue, diplomacy, mediation, and other peaceful mechanisms must always be prioritized in policymaking. According to Stevens (1989), the fundamental goal of war throughout history has not been mere defense, but rather the survival of humanity, preservation of social structures, and strengthening of internal solidarity. In Islamic thought, the ethics of war is governed by reason, justice, protection of civilians, and avoidance of unnecessary violence. Islamic texts emphasize avoiding aggression, maintaining fairness, and pursuing peace when possible—principles that closely align with the just war theory in contemporary ethical discourse.

Within contemporary analytical philosophy, there are two different ways in which moral and political philosophers think about war. On the first, institutionalist, approach, philosophers' primary goal is to establish what the institutions regulating war should be. In particular, we should prescribe morally justified laws of war. We then tell individuals and groups that they ought to follow those laws. On the second approach, we should focus first on the moral reasons that apply directly to individual and group actions, without the mediating factor of institutions. We tell individuals and groups to act as their moral reasons dictate. Since this approach focuses not on the institutions that govern our interactions, but on those interactions themselves, we will call it the "interactional" approach. In general, the institutionalist approach is favoured by indirect consequentialists and contractualists. Indirect consequentialists believe these institutions are justified just in case they will in fact have better long-run results than any feasible alternative institutions (Waldron 2016). Contractualists believe these institutions ground or reflect either an actual or a hypothetical contract among states and/or their citizens, which specifies the terms of their interaction in war (Benbaji 2008).

Non-contractualist deontologists and direct- or act-consequentialists tend to prefer the interactional approach. Their central question is: what moral reasons bear directly on the permissibility of killing in war? This focus on killing might seem myopic—war involves much more violence and destruction than the killing alone. However, typically this is just a heuristic device; since we typically think of killing as the most presumptively wrongful kind of harm, whatever arguments one identifies that justify killing are likely also to justify lesser wrongs. And if the killing that war involves cannot be justified, then we should endorse pacifism. Any normative theory of war should pay attention both to what the laws of war should be, and to what we morally ought to do. These are two distinct but equally important questions. And they entail the importance of a third:

what ought we to do all things considered, for example when law and morality conflict? Too much recent just war theory has focused on arguing that philosophical attention should be reserved to one of the first two of these questions. Not enough has concentrated on the third (Lazar 2012).

Although this entry touches on the first question, it focuses on the second. Addressing the first requires detailed empirical research and pragmatic political speculation, both of which are beyond my remit here. Addressing the third takes us too deep into the minutiae of contemporary just war theory for an encyclopedia entry. What's more, even institutionalists need some answer to the second question—and so some account of the interactional morality of war. Rule-consequentialists need an account of the good (bad) that they are hoping that the ideal laws of war will maximise (minimise) in the long run. This means, for example, deciding whether to aim to minimise all harm, or only to minimise wrongful harm. The latter course is much more plausible—we wouldn't want laws of war that, for example, licensed genocide just in case doing so leads to fewer deaths overall. The question of whether war can be morally justified represents one of the fundamental challenges in contemporary political philosophy and ethics. At one end of the spectrum, pacifists argue that war is inherently immoral and cannot be justified under any circumstances; at the other end, realists consider war an unavoidable phenomenon beyond the scope of ethical evaluation. Positioned between these perspectives, Just War Theory seeks a middle path, asserting that war may only be morally legitimate under specific conditions and stringent ethical constraints (Walzer, 2015, 51–55).

Building upon Walzer's framework, further insight into the moral complexities of war emerges through the work of contemporary theorists such as Jean Bethke Elshtain, Michael Ignatieff, and Thomas Nagel. Elshtain emphasizes the ethical responsibility of political communities to act against gross violations of human rights, asserting that moral obligations extend beyond borders and necessitate intervention in the face of genocide, ethnic cleansing, or systematic oppression. Unlike classical just war theorists who often prioritize state sovereignty, Elshtain foregrounds the *responsibility to protect*, arguing that political and military decision-makers are accountable not only for the strategic outcome of war but also for the ethical legitimacy of their actions in preventing injustice. This perspective complements Walzer's insistence on moral discrimination but expands it to include proactive duties of states and international coalitions to prevent atrocity before it occurs (Elshtain, 2003, 89).

Michael Ignatieff further develops this humanitarian dimension by examining the tension between the ethical justification for military intervention and the pragmatic consequences of such action. Ignatieff contends that liberal democracies face a dual responsibility: to protect human life and dignity abroad while maintaining accountability at home for the moral and legal consequences of their actions. He explores the ethical calculus involved in decisions to engage militarily, emphasizing that interventions must aim not merely at strategic or political objectives but at minimizing human suffering. Ignatieff's analysis resonates with the modern challenges identified in the present study, particularly regarding the asymmetry of harm in contemporary conflicts, where intervention may prevent large-scale atrocities but still result in civilian casualties. Consequently, ethical justifications cannot rely solely on consequentialist metrics; they must integrate principles of proportionality and moral intent (Ignatieff, 2000, 120).

Thomas Nagel offers a complementary perspective by examining the moral permissibility of actions in war from the standpoint of individual responsibility and impartiality. Nagel's critique of both pacifist and realist positions underscores the importance of evaluating the morality of war not only at the state level but also in terms of the rights and duties of individuals involved in conflict.

He emphasizes that ethical evaluation must consider both intended and foreseeable outcomes, ensuring that combatants are held morally accountable for harm inflicted on noncombatants, even when such harm is indirectly caused. Nagel's focus on individual moral agency bridges the gap between Walzer's collective ethics and contemporary concerns about autonomous weapons, drones, and remote operations, highlighting the necessity of adapting just war principles to technological and strategic transformations (Nagel, 1972, 239). Together, these theorists provide a multidimensional expansion of Walzer's moral realism, offering both ethical depth and practical guidance for contemporary conflicts. Elshtain introduces proactive obligations, Ignatieff emphasizes humanitarian accountability within liberal democracies, and Nagel ensures attention to individual moral responsibility. Integrating these perspectives enhances the applicability of just war theory in modern contexts, particularly in addressing dilemmas posed by asymmetric warfare, international interventions, and emerging technologies. By synthesizing their insights, scholars and policymakers can approach the ethics of war with a richer framework, bridging moral philosophy, political theory, and practical ethics to guide responsible conduct in an increasingly complex global landscape.

Just war theory Rooted in Christian tradition and medieval philosophy, this theory has become a central framework in contemporary discussions of moral philosophy, international law, and international relations. According to this theory, the moral evaluation of war occurs on two levels: the legitimacy of initiating war (*jus ad bellum*) and the legitimacy of conduct during war (*jus in bello*). At the first level, criteria include "just cause," "right intention," "proportionality," "last resort," and "authorization by a legitimate authority" (Orend, 2006, 43). Defending against foreign aggression or preventing genocide serves as clear examples of just causes (Orend, 2006, 105). At the second level—ethics on the battlefield—two principles are of paramount importance: the distinction between combatants and non-combatants, and proportionality in the use of force. Michael Walzer, in his seminal work *Just and Unjust Wars*, emphasizes that killing civilians—even if it leads to a quicker victory—is never justifiable, and violating this principle constitutes a complete moral collapse of the ethics of war (Walzer, 2015, 146). However, Just War Theory faces new challenges in the contemporary world. Jeff McMahan, in *Killing in War*, argues that moral legitimacy is not limited to the initiation of war; the moral status of individual combatants must also be considered. According to him, a soldier fighting for an unjust cause—even while fully observing *jus in bello* principles—still commits a moral wrongdoing (McMahan, 2009, 35–36). This view challenges the traditional distinction between justice in the initiation of war and justice during war, highlighting the need to rethink Just War Theory. Orend has similarly proposed a comprehensive framework that systematically reinterprets ethical principles of war for contemporary conditions (Orend, 2006, 115).

Conclusion

The *Just War Theory* is founded on the principle that resorting to war must be ethically responsible, temporally and geographically limited, and undertaken only as a last resort after all peaceful options have been exhausted. While in some cases war may result in outcomes such as defending human rights or ending military occupation, it should never be considered a desirable or hopeful phenomenon. Particularly in the era of modern warfare, many conflicts are not driven by emancipatory motives, but rather by geopolitical interests, economic competition, or regional expansionism—issues that could be addressed through effective diplomacy and rational policymaking.

The primary goal must be to reduce the frequency and intensity of wars, not to normalize or legitimize them. Therefore, decisions to engage in warfare must be based on ethical, philosophical, and humanitarian foundations, and should only be considered when peaceful solutions have fully failed. In this regard, international institutions play a crucial role. These bodies must refrain from legitimizing wars rooted in national interest or hegemonic ambitions, and instead focus their efforts on global arms reduction and the development of deterrent legal frameworks.

A reform of national and international legal systems is required so that all military operations are guided by moral, philosophical, and humanitarian charters, with the protection of life, dignity, and human worth placed at the forefront. In addition, implementing policies aimed at limiting the production and stockpiling of weapons can significantly contribute to reducing violence and promoting a culture of peace.

Although such measures alone may not completely eliminate warfare, they can open new horizons for restructuring global order and shaping new standards in the field of international peace and security. As such, further research into the nature of war and the possibility of its containment—particularly from the perspectives of philosophical anthropology and social psychology—is essential. The core question—whether war is an inescapable aspect of human nature or a historical phenomenon that can be controlled—should lie at the center of future scholarly inquiry.

In the current global landscape, a significant portion of modern conflicts do not arise from the pursuit of freedom or legitimate defense, but from avoidable causes—factors that could be managed through crisis prevention, diplomatic mediation, and coordination among international institutions. For this reason, it must be recognized that the primary mission of the global community is the gradual and structural reduction of the root causes of war and their replacement with legal mechanisms, international dialogue, and ethics grounded in peace. Only through this path can humanity move toward a safer, more humane, and violence-free future.

This study, through a comparative and critical analysis of the three principal approaches in the philosophy of war—realism, pacifism, and just war theory—demonstrates that, although these traditions remain foundational to normative debates on war, they are insufficient, on their own, to address the complex and multilayered realities of contemporary conflicts. The findings highlight several key insights and distinctive philosophical critiques. Realism, by framing war within the logic of national interests and the imperative of survival, plays an important explanatory role; yet its normative silence results in disregard for justice, human rights, and the moral responsibilities of states. In today's context, where wars are often justified through ethical and humanitarian claims, realism effectively lacks the capacity for moral critique. Pacifism, with its uncompromising rejection of violence, underscores the intrinsic value of human dignity. However, this absolutist stance proves ineffective in situations such as self-defense against aggression or the prevention of genocide. Thus, pacifism generates a paradox: fidelity to absolute ethics may, in practice, entail the abandonment of justice.

Just war theory has remained the most philosophically influential approach, as it seeks to strike a balance between political necessities and moral constraints. Nevertheless, it continues to rely heavily on traditional categories such as **jus ad bellum** and **jus in bello**, categories increasingly destabilized by modern forms of warfare—cyber operations, proxy conflicts, transnational terrorism, and autonomous weapons. Without a fundamental revision and conceptual expansion, just war theory risks losing its effectiveness in addressing the realities of contemporary war. A shared weakness across these classical approaches is the absence of a preventive and multidimensional

ethic. They focus primarily on legitimizing or rejecting war once it has begun, rather than on preventing its outbreak. This theoretical gap underscores the need for a new integrative framework—one that synthesizes the preventive ethic of pacifism, the normative precision of just war theory, and the pragmatic realism of political necessity. The present study shows that Islamic thought, with its emphasis on justice, legitimate defense, and strict humanitarian constraints, exhibits significant overlap with just war theory, while also offering a sharp critique of realism's moral silence. This intercultural convergence reveals the potential for constructing a "global ethic of war" that transcends Western philosophical exclusivism by integrating shared human and religious principles. The overall conclusion is that the philosophy of war in the twenty-first century cannot rely solely on the classical traditions. A revised and multidimensional framework—one that is attentive to technological transformations (cyber warfare, artificial intelligence, and media) while grounded in human dignity and global justice—is indispensable. Such a framework must extend beyond the normative evaluation of wars to practical policymaking, including the design of binding international institutions, the development of disarmament mechanisms, and the expansion of preventive diplomacy.

Building upon the preceding analysis, it is essential to further contextualize Michael Walzer's contribution to the philosophy of war, as his *Just and Unjust Wars* (1977) remains the most influential and contested articulation of moral reasoning in warfare. Walzer revitalized the just war tradition by grounding it in *communitarian ethics*, emphasizing that moral judgments in war arise not from abstract universalism but from the shared values of political communities. His central concept of the *moral equality of soldiers*—the idea that combatants on both sides are equally bound by and protected under the moral rules of war—seeks to preserve the humanity of individuals within the chaos of conflict. However, as this study suggests, Walzer's framework, while groundbreaking for its time, faces profound challenges in the age of asymmetric, cyber, and proxy wars. The very notion of a bounded battlefield and identifiable combatants—fundamental to *jus in bello*—has eroded. Consequently, Walzer's reliance on the state-centered paradigm of moral responsibility must be reconsidered in light of non-state actors, automated warfare, and the weaponization of information.

Walzer's moral realism, which insists that war is a realm of both necessity and morality, presupposes that human beings are capable of ethical restraint even in conditions of existential threat. Yet, as critics like Brian Orend and Jeff McMahan have argued, this realism tends to obscure structural injustices and the asymmetry of moral agency between aggressors and victims. McMahan's revisionist just war theory, for instance, directly challenges Walzer's *moral equality of combatants*, asserting that soldiers fighting for an unjust cause cannot claim the same moral protection as those defending themselves or others. This debate exposes a deeper philosophical tension between *collective responsibility* and *individual moral accountability*. In modern warfare—where drone operators, cyber warriors, and private contractors often act far from the battlefield—the boundaries of guilt, innocence, and legitimate defense blur beyond Walzer's moral map. Comparatively, earlier thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas conceived just war within a theocentric moral order, where divine justice defined legitimate violence. Augustine's focus on right intention (*intentio recta*) and Aquinas's tripartite criteria—*legitimate authority, just cause, and right intention*—provided the theological architecture for later secular theories. Walzer secularized this tradition, embedding it within the sovereignty of nations and the moral consciousness of citizens. However, his framework arguably underestimates the transformative impact of globalization and the

erosion of state monopolies on violence. In this sense, his vision remains too tethered to the Westphalian order, whereas the moral reality of twenty-first-century warfare increasingly unfolds across networks, technologies, and transnational identities.

From another perspective, John Rawls's *The Law of Peoples* (1999) sought to reinterpret just war theory through a liberal internationalist lens, proposing that "well-ordered peoples" may wage war only in defense of human rights and against "outlaw states." While Rawls extends Walzer's humanitarian concern, his theory remains politically idealized, assuming rational cooperation among states that seldom materializes in practice. In contrast, Alasdair MacIntyre's virtue ethics raises a more fundamental critique: that modern moral discourse, including just war theory, suffers from fragmentation and the loss of a coherent moral tradition. Without shared virtues or narratives of the common good, moral debates about war risk devolving into technical justifications devoid of ethical depth. This resonates strongly with the argument advanced in the present study—that contemporary war ethics must recover a substantive moral framework rooted in both universal human dignity and cross-cultural moral traditions.

Within this broader landscape, Islamic philosophy of war offers a distinctive and largely overlooked contribution. Thinkers from Al-Farabi to Mulla Sadra approached the ethics of war not merely as jurisprudential regulation (**fiqh al-jihad**), but as part of a comprehensive vision of justice (**'adl**), balance (**mizan**), and the preservation of life (**hifz al-nafs**). While overlapping with the moral logic of **jus ad bellum** and **jus in bello**, Islamic ethics emphasizes the inseparability of intention, means, and outcome. It condemns aggression and the destruction of noncombatants while mandating defensive resistance against oppression (**zulm**). In this light, Islamic thought addresses precisely the lacuna identified in Western theories: the absence of an explicit preventive ethic. By prioritizing moral discipline before, during, and after conflict, it provides a bridge between pacifist restraint and just war accountability. Furthermore, contemporary scholars such as Jean Bethke Elshtain and Michael Ignatieff expanded Walzer's humanitarian paradigm, arguing for morally grounded interventions to prevent atrocities. Yet their defense of **humanitarian war** reintroduces the paradox the present study warns against: the instrumentalization of ethics as a justification for power politics. Once moral language becomes a tool of strategic legitimacy, its normative force erodes. Thus, a sustainable ethics of war must be decoupled from the ambitions of states and rooted instead in an autonomous, intercultural moral consensus. This is where the concept of a "global ethic of war" becomes crucial—not as a utopian ideal, but as a practical framework integrating the preventive ethics of pacifism, the normative clarity of just war theory, and the contextual realism of political necessity.

Walzer's own later writings, particularly *Arguing About War* (2004), reveal his awareness of these dilemmas. He acknowledges that new forms of violence—terrorism, humanitarian intervention, occupation, and preemptive defense—stretch the traditional moral vocabulary of just war beyond recognition. Nonetheless, his solution remains interpretive rather than reconstructive: to refine moral reasoning case by case. The argument advanced here, by contrast, calls for a more systemic transformation—a rearticulation of war ethics that aligns philosophical anthropology, social psychology, and technological awareness. Rather than merely revising the categories of **jus ad bellum** and **jus in bello**, this new framework demands the addition of **jus ante bellum** (the justice before war), focusing on the moral, institutional, and communicative structures that can prevent war's eruption altogether.

While Walzer and his predecessors provided the moral vocabulary through which modern societies evaluate war, their frameworks were shaped by a geopolitical order that is rapidly dissolving. The ethics of war in the twenty-first century must evolve from static evaluation to dynamic prevention, from national sovereignty to shared human responsibility, and from moral abstraction to institutional embodiment. Only by integrating insights from diverse philosophical traditions—Western, Islamic, and beyond—can humanity approach the possibility of a truly universal ethic of restraint. Such an ethic would not only govern the conduct of war but transform our understanding of peace itself, redefining it not as the mere absence of conflict but as the active cultivation of justice, empathy, and mutual security among nations.

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