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| Ethics of War - Introduction |

### Introduction

Human beings have been fighting each other since prehistoric times, and people have been discussing the rights and wrongs of it for almost as long.

### War is bad

The Ethics of War starts by assuming that war is a bad thing, and should be avoided if possible, but it recognises that there can be situations when war may be the lesser evil of several bad choices.

War is a bad thing because it involves deliberately killing or injuring people, and this is a fundamental wrong - an abuse of the victims' human rights.

### War ethics

The purpose of war ethics is to help decide what is right or wrong, both for individuals and countries, and to contribute to debates on public policy, and ultimately to government and individual action.

War ethics also leads to the creation of formal codes of war (e.g. the Hague and Geneva conventions), the drafting and implementation of rules of engagement for soldiers, and in the punishment of soldiers and others for war crimes.

**The three key questions are:**

* [**Is it ever right to go to war?**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/war/against/pacifism_1.shtml)
* [**When is it right to wage war?**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/war/just/what.shtml)
* [**What is the moral way to conduct a war?**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/war/just/conduct.shtml)

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| Pacifism |

There are several different sorts of pacifism, but they all include the idea that war and violence are unjustifiable, and that conflicts should be settled in a peaceful way.

People are pacifists for one or some of these reasons:

* religious faith
* non-religious belief in the sanctity of life
* practical belief that war is wasteful and ineffective

Many believe that pacifism is more than opposition to war. They argue that it must include action to promote justice and human rights. (Consider for example whether the preservation of peace throughout the British Empire justified the human rights violations of that colonial regime.)

### Levels of pacifism

It's important to see the difference between the morality of pacifism as it applies to an individual, and the application of that morality to the behaviour of a nation-state.

Not appreciating this difference can lead to real difficulties in discussing pacifism and non-violence.

### Consistency

Pacifists are often thought of as totally opposed to killing, but they don't have to be. A pacifist can logically support euthanasia and abortion, although they would need to have thought their position through very carefully.

### Types of pacifism:

### Absolute pacifism

An absolute pacifist believes that it is never right to take part in war, even in self-defence. They think that the value of human life is so high that nothing can justify killing a person deliberately.

To stick to this principle consistently is hard. It views it as unethical to use violence to rescue an innocent person who is being attacked and may be killed, and this is not a comfortable moral position.

Absolute pacifists usually hold this view as a basic moral or spiritual principle, without regard to the results of war or violence, however they could logically argue that violence always leads to worse results than non-violence.

### Conditional pacifism

Conditional pacifists are against war and violence in principle, but they accept that there may be circumstances when war will be less bad than the alternative.

Conditional pacifists usually base their moral code on Utilitarian principles - it's the bad consequences that make it wrong to resort to war or violence.

### Selective pacifism

Other pacifists believe that it is a matter of degree, and only oppose wars involving weapons of mass destruction - nuclear or chemical and biological weapons - either because of the uniquely devastating consequences of such weapons, or because a war that uses such weapons is not 'winnable'.

### Active pacifism

Pacifists are heavily involved in political activity to promote peace, and to argue against particular wars.

During a war many pacifists will refuse to fight, but some will take part in activities that seek to reduce the harm of war; e.g. by driving ambulances, but other pacifists will refuse to take part in any activity that might support the war.

Not all pacifists are brave enough to act according to these beliefs and to refuse to fight, but many have, bravely choosing punishment, and even execution, rather than go to war.

Nowadays most democratic countries accept that people have the right of conscientious objection to military service, but they usually expect the objector to undertake some form of public service as an alternative.

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| Just War – An Introduction |

### Introduction

The just war theory is a largely Christian philosophy that attempts to reconcile three things:

1. Taking human life is seriously wrong
2. States have a duty to defend their citizens, and defend justice
3. Protecting innocent human life and defending important moral values sometimes requires willingness to use force and violence

The theory specifies conditions for judging if it is just to go to war, and conditions for how the war should be fought.

Although it was extensively developed by Christian theologians, it can be used by people of every faith and none.

### Purpose

The aim of Just War Theory is to provide a guide to the right way for states to act in potential conflict situations. It only applies to states, and not to individuals (although an individual can use the theory to help them decide whether it is morally right to take part in a particular war).

Just War Theory provides a useful framework for individuals and political groups to use for their discussions of possible wars.

The theory is not intended to justify wars but to prevent them, by showing that going to war except in certain limited circumstances is wrong, and thus motivate states to find other ways of resolving conflicts.

### 'Just', or merely 'permissible'?

The doctrine of the Just War can deceive a person into thinking that because a war is just; it's actually a good thing.

But behind contemporary war theory lies the idea that war is always bad. A just war is permissible because it's a lesser evil, but it's still an evil.

### Origins

The principles of a Just War originated with classical Greek and Roman philosophers like Plato and Cicero and were added to by Christian theologians like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

However, the intent of the precept forbids the purposeful taking of human life. **Each person has a duty to preserve his life, and therefore has a right to legitimate self defence.** Although an act of self-defence may have a two-fold effect — the preservation of the person's life and the unfortunate taking of the aggressor's life — the first effect is intended while the second is not.

In preserving its own life, a state — citizens and their governments — must strive to avoid war and settle disputes peacefully and justly. Nevertheless, "governments cannot be denied the right of lawful self-defence, once all peace efforts have failed" (Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, #79). Such a right does not entail carte blanche permission for any and all acts of war. Just war theory establishes moral parameters for the declaration and waging of war.

St. Augustine (d. 430) was the originator of the just war theory, which St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) later adapted and explicated in his Summa Theologiae.

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| Just War  |

### Elements

There are two parts to Just War theory, both with Latin names:

* **Jus ad bellum:** the conditions under which the use of military force is justified.
* **Jus in bello:** how to conduct a war in an ethical manner.

A war is only a Just War if it is both justified, and carried out in the right way. Some wars fought for noble causes have been rendered unjust because of the way in which they were fought.

### What is a Just War?

Six conditions must be satisfied for a war to be considered just:

1. The war must be for a just cause.
2. The war must be lawfully declared by a lawful authority.
3. The intention behind the war must be good.
4. All other ways of resolving the problem should have been tried first.
5. There must be a reasonable chance of success.
6. The means used must be in proportion to the end that the war seeks to achieve.

### How should a Just War be fought?

A war that starts as a Just War may stop being a Just War if the means used to wage it are inappropriate.

* Innocent people and non-combatants should not be harmed.
* Only appropriate force should be used.
* This applies to both the sort of force, and how much force is used.
* Internationally agreed conventions regulating war must be obeyed.

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| Against the Theory of a Just War |

Some people argue that the Just War doctrine is inherently immoral, while others suggest that there is no place for ethics in war. Still others argue that the doctrine doesn't apply in the conditions of modern conflicts.

Here are some of the arguments that have been put forward:

All war is unjust and has no place in any ethical theory.

Morality must always oppose deliberate violence.

Just war ideas tend to make violence acceptable, rather than restrain it.

War so disrupts the normal rules of society that morality goes out of the window.

In a conflict "the strong do what they will, and the weak do what they must" (Think of Protagoras et al.)

The decision to wage war is governed by realism and relative strength, not ethics. Morality thus has no use in war.

If God 'requires us to make war' it would be wrong to disobey him, regardless of the requirements of the Just War theory.

In the Bible God is frequently on the side of those waging wars that don't conform to just war theory.

The overriding aim of war should be to achieve victory as quickly and cheaply as possible.

If the cause is just, then no restrictions should be placed on achieving it.

The rules of conduct of war are mere camouflage because they are always over-ruled by 'military necessity'.

The existence of nuclear, chemical or biological weapons of mass destruction requires a different approach to the problem. These weapons can only be used for unrestricted war and so the condition of proportionality can't be met if they are used. Using these weapons guarantees civilian casualties, and thus breaks a basic rule of the conduct of war. Since these weapons can't be un-invented they render just war theory pointless. In recent times it has become possible to target such weapons quite precisely, so the problems above only apply to indiscriminate versions of such weapons. The ethics of weapons of mass destruction are a different topic. Terrorists are inherently uninterested in morality, so following any ethical theory of war handicaps those whom terrorists attack - thus a different approach is needed.

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| Holy Wars |

Modern people often regard the idea of a holy war as a contradiction. Killing thousands of people and causing wholesale destruction seems to be as far from holiness as one can get.

But religion and war have gone hand in hand for a long time. Armies go into battle believing that God is with them, often after prayers and sacrifices to keep God on their side. In tribal cultures (including Biblical ones) when a people lose a war they often have to change to the worship of the winner's gods.

However involving God as part of the campaign does not make a war a holy war - for a war to be a holy war, religion has to be the driving force.

Holy wars usually have three elements:

1. The achievement of a religious goal
2. Authorised by a religious leader
3. A spiritual reward for those who take part

Many of the wars fought in the name of religion do conform to the just war conditions, but not all of them.

### Religious causes

Francis Bacon said there were five causes for holy war: (he wrote in a Christian context, but the categories would be usable by any faith)

* to spread the faith
* to retrieve countries that were once Christian, even though there are no Christians left there
* to rescue Christians in countries that were once Christian from 'the servitude of the infidels'
* recover and purify consecrated places that are presently being 'polluted and profaned'
* avenge blasphemous acts, or cruelties and killings of Christians (even if these took place long ago)

Only the first of these causes is completely outside the scope of the conventional idea of a just cause. Some of the other causes, because of the length of time that can pass since the offending act took place are probably not just causes either.

### Lawful authority

The legitimate authority for a holy war is not the government of a state (except in a theocracy) but the Church, or the relevant organisation or person who heads the religious institution concerned. In ancient times the authority was often God - in the Bible there are several occasions where God gave direct instructions to peoples to wage war. This would not be the case today.

### Personal reward

The third condition of a holy war is a spiritual reward for those who take part. The doctrine of the just war does not refer to any personal rewards for the participants - and such rewards would be against such a generally austere doctrine.

### History

The first holy war was probably in October 312 CE when the Roman emperor Constantine saw a vision of the cross in the sky with this inscription "in hoc signo vinces" (in this sign you will win).

Constantine trusted the vision and had the cross inscribed on his soldiers' armor. Even though his forces were outnumbered, he won the battle against an army that was using pagan enchantment. (Historians regard this as a turning point in Christianity's fortune.)

### The Crusades

The great series of western holy wars were the Crusades, which lasted from 1095 until 1291 CE. The aim was to capture the sacred places in the Holy Land from the Muslims who lived there, so it was intended as a war to right wrongs done against Christianity.

The first Crusade was started by Pope Urban II in 1095. He raged at the capture of the holy places and the treatment given to Christians, and ordered a war to restore Christianity. He said that the war would have the support of God:

Let this be your war cry in combats, because this word is given to you by God. When an armed attack is made upon the enemy, let this on cry be raised by all the soldiers of God: It is the will of God! It is the will of God!

The pope also absolved all who took part in the crusade of all their sins.

The first Crusade captured Jerusalem after bitter fighting, and the residents of the city were brutalised and slaughtered by the Christian invaders. The invaders' conduct breached the principles of modern just war ethics, and the massacres still colour Islamic politics today.

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| Judaism and War |

Judaism does not regard violence and war to promote justice as always wrong. It accepts that certain kinds of war will be ethically justified, and that it is sometimes morally acceptable to kill people.

Before declaring war or starting a battle there must be a genuine attempt to make peace and avoid the conflict.

Jewish law only permits combatants to be deliberately killed in war. Innocent civilians must be given every opportunity to leave the field of combat before a battle starts.

### Old Testament

In much of the Old Testament God gives his clear approval to war. He is identified as a warrior, and is shown as leading the Jews in conflict, bringing them victory, protecting them from enemy forces.

But at the same time the Old Testament is filled with Jewish longing for peace

*They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not life up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.*

### Peace

Peace is seen as something that comes from God and that will only be fully realised when there is justice and harmony not just between peoples, but within individual communities.

The importance of peace to the Jewish people is emphasised by 'Shalom', the conventional greeting between Jews from the earliest times, which means 'peace'.

### Self-defence

The Talmud states that a person (a Jew or a non-Jew) is permitted to kill "a pursuer" to save his own life. This ruling applies to both individuals and groups of people (including states).

### The Rabbis

The ancient rabbis thought that there were three types of war that a Jewish state should consider:

1. **Obligatory wars:** these are wars that God commanded Jews to fight. They include the biblical wars against the Canaanites and against the Amalekites. (See end notes.)
2. **Defensive wars:** (These are also obligatory.) If the Jewish people are attacked, they are obliged to defend themselves. This doctrine covers pre-emptive strikes (which is when a country attacks an enemy who is about to attack it). Some writers think that a war of self-defence doesn't count as a war, but is merely the normal action that can be taken under the Jewish law dealing with attackers and based on Genesis 9:6 "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed."
3. **Optional wars:** These are wars undertaken for a good reason, and where no other form of "negotiation" remains possible.

### The rules of war

The Jewish tradition is clear that before declaring war, or starting a battle, there must be an attempt to make peace - any military action without doing this is probably unlawful (Deuteronomy 20:10).

Only combatants are allowed to be killed intentionally in war. Military commanders should give non-combatants a good chance to leave the combat area before the battle starts. (This is usually impractical in modern warfare.)

However some authorities say that if a non-combatant knowingly stays in a place where a battle is about to take place, they lose their protection.

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| Christianity and War |

The main Christian view of [**war ethics**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/war/) is contained in the doctrine of the [**Just War**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/war/just/introduction.shtml).

The basic assumption of modern Christians is that war is rarely justified and should be avoided unless the Just War conditions are met.

An individual Christian may believe that the standard of evidence and argument required for them to support a war is higher than the standard of evidence that national leaders may require to go to war.

Christianity is no longer (if it ever was) wholly against war. Some say that modern Christianity has a 'presumption against war', but others say that it has a 'presumption against injustice' - and the bias against war comes from the injustice that war can do.

This view says that the aim of Christianity is to promote a world in which peace and justice flourish everywhere: war may sometimes be the tool needed to do this, and waging war may sometimes be a lesser evil (a lesser injustice) than allowing injustice to persist or tolerating the victimisation of innocent people.

[**How do Christian chaplains in the armed forces feel about war?**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/priests/armychaplains_7.shtml)

### Pacifism

Christians have a long history of refusing to take part in war. Many Christians are [**pacifists**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/war/against/pacifism_1.shtml) of various types. These range from peace activists to those who need a great deal to convince them that war is justified.

The Christian argument for pacifism is based partly on Jesus's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount and other places, and in the example that Jesus sets Christians through his life.

Those who argue against this say that Christ's pacifist nature and behaviour were part of his unique role as redeemer of humanity. Christians are not redeemers and so their conduct should follow Christ by seeking to bring peace and justice to the world even if this means not always 'turning the other cheek'.

Christian groups that emphasise pacifism include:

* Mennonites: a church that grew out of the Protestant Reformation in Europe in the early 1500s. Mennonites believe Christ's injunction to "love your enemies" prevents them from participating in any way in military action against another country.
* [**Quakers**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/quakers_1.shtml) (or The Religious Society of Friends): a Christian group with a total commitment to non-violence. In 1660 the Quakers declared "...the spirit of Christ which leads us into all Truth will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of the world."

### History

The Christian view of war has changed throughout the history of the faith.

The early church (the first 300 years) was strongly pacifist. Origen said that Christians "do not go forth as soldiers". Tertullian wrote "only without the sword can the Christian wage war: for the Lord has abolished the sword." Clement of Alexandria wrote "...he who holds the sword must cast it away and that if one of the faithful becomes a soldier he must be rejected by the Church, for he has scorned God."

This changed rapidly in the time of Constantine - the Council of Arles in 314 said that to forbid "the state the right to go to war was to condemn it to extinction", and shortly after that Christian philosophers began to formulate the doctrine of the Just War.

For many centuries Christians believed that it was right and proper to use violence (and thus war) to spread the faith and deal with its opponents. They did not regard violence as an inherently bad thing: whether it was bad or not depended on what it was being used for.

This thinking is covered under [**holy wars**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/war/religious/holywar.shtml) - the main examples of which, for Christians, are the Crusades.

From Constantine onwards Christian writers and preachers have used warlike and soldierly metaphors in their writing about the faith.

The idea that violence is not inherently bad can also be seen in some versions of the Just War doctrine - violence (war) can be a vital tool in restoring justice and peace.

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| Islam and War |

Islam sets down clear guidelines as to when [**war**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/war/) is ethically right, and clear guidelines as to how such a war should be conducted.

In brief, war is permitted:

* in self defence
* when other nations have attacked an Islamic state
* if another state is oppressing its own Muslims

War should be conducted:

* in a disciplined way
* so as to avoid injuring non-combatants
* with the minimum necessary force
* without anger
* with humane treatment towards prisoners of war

Muslims must only wage war according to the principles of Allah's justice.

Those who believe fight in the way of Allah, and those who disbelieve fight in the way of the Shaitan.

Qur’an 4:76

Islam allows war in self-defence (Qur'an 22:39), to defend Islam (rather than to spread it), to protect those who have been removed from their homes by force because they are Muslims (Qur'an 22:40), and to protect the innocent who are being oppressed (Qur'an 4:75).

But some Muslim thinkers in the past, and some more radical Muslim thinkers today, take a different view. They say that other verses in the [**Qur'an**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/texts/quran_1.shtml), the so-called 'sword verses', have "abrogated" (revoked or anulled) the verses that permit warfare only in defence. They used these 'sword verses' to justify war against unbelievers as a tool of spreading Islam (Qur'an 9:5, 9:29).

Others take this further and regard non-Muslims, and Muslims who don't conform rigorously to the Islamic code, as non-believers and thus as "enemies of God" against whom it is legitimate to use violence.

But the idea of a total and unrestricted conflict is completely unIslamic.

Fight in the cause of God against those who fight you, but do not transgress limits. God does not love transgressors.

Qur’an 2:190

Islam is in favour of peace and against violence. Murdering the innocent leads to punishment in Hell:

If anyone killed a person – unless it was for murder or for spreading mischief in the land – it would be as if he killed the whole people.

Qur’an 5:32

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| End Notes |

**Amelekites:**

The Biblical relationship between the Hebrew and Amalekite tribes was that the Amalekite tribes without provocation pounced on the Hebrews when they were weak. The Amalekites became associated with ruthlessness and trickery and tyranny, even more so than Pharaoh or the Philistines, and required a ruthless response:

"*8 Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. 9 So Moses said to Joshua, “Choose for us men, and go out and fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand.” 10 So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. 11 Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. 12 But Moses’ hands grew weary, so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side. So his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. 13 And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword.*

"*14 Then the Lord said to Moses, “Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.” 15 And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The Lord is my banner, 16 saying, “A hand upon the throne of the Lord Jacob! The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.*"

(Exodus 17)

*Sources:*

*Catholiceducation.org*

*BBC Ethics website*