# Philosophers Facing War: Oversights and Limitations

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**Abstract**

This article examines how philosophers have approached the ethics of war, from Socrates to contemporary discussions. Philosophers throughout history have actively participated in combat and developed ethics of war that continue to inform doctrines of war, but these ethics also have shortcomings that require reevaluation. Factors such as national origin and religious beliefs have significantly influenced philosophical perspectives throughout history. However, philosophical approaches do not consistently align with these factors; some philosophers criticize the military positions of their own countries, while others misuse religious ethics in their arguments. Furthermore, philosophers sometimes change their views after conflicts arise, disregard historical facts and theological foundations, overlook the approaches of earlier scholars, even while drawing from them, and may even endorse harmful ideologies. The history of ethical philosophy related to questions of war presents scholars from diverse backgrounds with ample opportunities to explore the complexities of warfare.

**Keywords:** Philosophers; Wars; Ethics; History.

***Resumo***
*Filósofos perante a Guerra: Lapsos e Limitações*

*Este artigo examina a forma como os filósofos abordaram a ética da guerra, desde Sócrates até às discussões contemporâneas. Ao longo da história, os filósofos participaram ativamente nos combates e desenvolveram éticas da guerra que continuam a fundamentar doutrinas da guerra, mas as suas abordagens também apresentam deficiências que exigem reavaliação. Fatores como a origem nacional e as crenças religiosas influenciaram significativamente as perspetivas filosóficas através dos tempos. No entanto, as abordagens filosóficas não estão consistentemente alinhadas com estes fatores; alguns filósofos criticam as posições militares dos seus próprios países, enquanto outros fazem um mau uso da ética religiosa nos seus argumentos. Além disso, os filósofos, por vezes, mudam de opinião após o surgimento de conflitos, desconsideram factos históricos e fundamentos teológicos, ignoram as abordagens de estudiosos anteriores, mesmo quando se baseiam neles, e podem até endossar ideologias danosas para a humanidade. A história da filosofia ética relacionada com as questões da guerra oferece aos estudiosos de diversas disciplinas amplas oportunidades para explorar as complexidades da guerra.*

***Palavras-chave:*** *Filósofos; Guerras; Ética; História.*

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## 1. Introduction

Literature exploring war and ethics has a history spanning thousands of years. Homer's *Iliad*, composed in the 8th century BCE, offers significant ethical reflections on war, while biblical writings also depict various military conflicts based on religious ethics. If one sets aside the discussions found in poetic or religious literature, such as those by Homer or biblical texts, determining who first addressed the question of the virtue of justice in war remains a contentious issue today. From a military perspective, we might begin with Thucydides or Xenophon. A philosophical perspective could lead us to Plato or Aristotle. If we take a more theological approach, thinkers like Augustine come to the forefront, while a political approach might prompt us to start with Cicero.

In 2018, Brunstetter and O'Driscoll edited a book that explores just war thinkers throughout history, starting their collection with Cicero. In contrast, Reichberg, Syse, and Begby's anthology, *The Ethics of War,* opens with discussions of Thucydides and Plato. Meanwhile, the 2017 collection *Philosophers on War,* edited by Eric Patterson and Timothy Demy, begins with the works of Plato and Aristotle.

Wars have a profound and lasting impact on human activities, encompassing social, ethical, and literary aspects. Many countries owe their existence, cultures, and boundaries to historical conflicts. However, today, there is a noticeable scarcity of philosophical works that address war-related issues.

It is impossible to separate philosophical ethics from war, because military power has long influenced the boundaries of clans, societies, tribes, and nations throughout history. Every military conflict, from ancient times to the present, is shaped by a moral framework that influences the behavior of both combatants and non-combatants before, during, and after the conflict. This framework affects their treatment of themselves, their enemies, their property, and their enemies' property.

In his book on the origins of modernity in philosophy, philosopher Michael Gillespie (2008) explained the impacts of World War I and II, the Holocaust, the Soviet Union, the fall of communism, and the terrorist attacks on Western philosophy. He stated that World War I demonstrated that the progressive development of human power could be both constructive and profoundly destructive, and that technical progress was not synonymous with moral progress or enhanced human well-being. The interwar period saw the growth of this pessimism about modernity in philosophical works. The Great Depression, the rise of National Socialism, and the outbreak of World War II brought new and deeper doubts about progress. After the Holocaust, it seemed impossible for even the most ardent modernists to speak of progress again. The advent of the Cold War with the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe in 1948 and the emergence of the threat of nuclear annihilation seemed to put the

final nail in the coffin of modernity. The events of September 11, in turn, questioned the widespread assumption that civilization is based on rational self-interest rather than religious faith.

American military historian Victor Davis Hanson (2001), in his book *Carnage and Culture*, which examines historical battles from Salamis (480 BCE) to the Tet Offensive (1968), argues that military historians owe the dead soldiers a full explanation of how government, science, law, and religion determined the fate of thousands of people on the battlefield. Hanson focused on military discipline and the lethality of Western warfare. However, government, science, law, and religion all involve ethical principles.

The renowned military historian Antony Beevor (2014), in his book *The Second World War*, argued that Hitler's seduction of the German people began, step by step, with the stripping away of human ethical values.

More recently, in 2021, Sean McFate, a former US Army paratrooper and PhD in International Relations from the London School of Economics, highlighted how ethical differences are relevant and increasingly unstable in determining the outcome of wars. McFate (2021) argued that the US military has not won a single war since World War II. Korea is a dead end that still stands. Vietnam went communist. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have also failed. The Islamic State has destroyed large swathes of Iraq, and Iran has extended its tentacles to Baghdad. The Taliban controls a swath of Afghanistan. The wars fought since 1945 have claimed lives, squandered billions of tax dollars, and compromised national honor without resolving anything on the ground.

McFate stated that this is not just a problem in the United States (U.S.); it has also occurred in France, England, and Russia, and is evident in the weaknesses of the UN's military actions. What would explain these routine defeats if the West had the best troops, training, technology, equipment, and resources? For McFate, the West needs to understand the military ethics of its enemies.

Philosophical ethics studies the foundations of virtue, right and wrong, and good and evil. It systematically examines the principles that guide moral decisions and explores the nature of moral judgments. In the context of war, ethical conflicts are always present, even in civil wars.

## 2. Philosophers in Combat

In this section, we will highlight some battlefield philosophers, those who have physically served in the military. Their experiences in combat have profoundly shaped their perspectives on the ethics of human conflict and have given us invaluable insights into the moral complexities of war.

The philosopher Socrates was a war hero. He is praised for his bravery and physical endurance in the Socratic dialogue *The Symposium* (Plato, 2024, p. 108). His disciples Plato and Xenophon report that Socrates, as an Athenian soldier, participated in the siege of the city of Potidaea (432 BC) and the battles of the Peloponnesian War (431--404 BC). In the Socratic dialogue Charmides (Plato, 2024, p. 9), Socrates recounts his return from the battle at Potidaea, describing it as extremely fierce, during which many of his acquaintances lost their lives.

Thucydides is considered the first modern historian and is highly regarded as a philosopher on the ethics of war. He participated in the Peloponnesian War as commander of the Athenian fleet and wrote about this conflict in his book, *History of the Peloponnesian War*. The ethical debate between Athens and the Island of Melos as described by Thucydides (2004), profoundly influenced philosophers throughout history. This includes Thomas Hobbes, who translated Thucydides and adopted the Athenian ethic that insists on the rule of the strongest over the weakest. Additionally, the debate between Corinth, Sparta, and Athens in the *Affair of Epidamnus* (Thucydides, 2004, Chapter II), highlights the concept of preventive war, which remains relevant today. Corinth urged Sparta to wage war against Athens to curb its growing power.

Plato, a disciple of Socrates, spent his entire youth during the Peloponnesian War. No one knows whether Plato participated in battles as a soldier. On the other hand, Plato wrote about war directly or indirectly in several of his works, including *The Republic*, *Laws*, *Alcibiades I*, and *Laches*. Plato is considered by some as one of the precursors of the idea of just war, with his approach to justice, both in *jus ad bellum* (when to wage war) and in *jus in bello* (what is right to do during war), within an approach that war is a necessity that aims at peace.

Aristotle, in turn, has a transversal and indirect relationship with military conflicts. He did not witness the Peloponnesian War. However, his birthplace, Stagira, in Macedonia, had a conflictual relationship with Athens. Stagira sided with Sparta in the war. Aristotle´s family and Aristotle himself had close relations with the political leaders of Macedonia. Aristotle arrived in Athens at the age of 17 and was a disciple of Plato there for 20 years. Philip II of Macedonia conquered Athens in 338 BC. He later invited Aristotle to be a pupil of his son, Alexander the Great, one of the greatest military conquerors in history. During the Macedonian domination of Athens, Aristotle founded his "university," called the Lyceum, and taught there for 11 years. When Alexander died prematurely in 323 BC, Aristotle was persecuted by the Athenians as a heretic, fled Athens, and died the following year. Thus, his influence in Athens was facilitated by Macedonian military dominance.

Jumping forward nearly seven hundred years, we arrive at Augustine of Hippo, who is often regarded as the father of the just war doctrine. Augustine lived through a transformative era in the Roman Empire, a time marked by internal strife and

external dangers that significantly shaped the course of history. He experienced firsthand the chaos of battles, civil wars, and barbarian invasions. Key events included the decisive Battle of Adrianople in 378, the Donatist schism of the fourth century, the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410, and the Visigoth invasion of North Africa in 430, during which the siege of Hippo resulted in Augustine's death.

Regarding Thomas Aquinas, another just war theorist, his family was connected to knighthood. His brother Renauld was imprisoned and ultimately killed by the forces of Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II. In addition to the turmoil of Italy's internal conflicts, Aquinas witnessed pivotal events such as the Seventh and Eighth Crusades and the Mongol invasions, which significantly shaped the course of history during his lifetime. He wrote many Questions in his *Summa Theologica* that inform his views on war, presenting a more philosophically developed perspective. It is also important to note his stance on Islam. Aquinas has very harsh words against Muhammad and Islam in his book, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (Book 1, Chapter 6, Article 4). These harsh words cannot be considered representative of his time and the Crusades, for much later, Winston Churchill wrote very similar things.[1]

Moving forward three centuries from Aquinas, the Spanish theologian Francisco de Vitoria, in the sixteenth century, is sometimes recognized as the "Father of International Law" a title most often given to the jurist Hugo Grotius, who was born one hundred years after Vitoria. In his book *Relecciones Sobre Los Indios y El Derecho De Guerra*, Vitoria wrote about the morality of war when discussing the issue of the Indians in America in their relationship with European colonizers. Vitoria was one of the first Christian thinkers to discuss war and peace with explicit reference to the common good, not just of an individual nation or people, but of the whole world. (Vitoria, 1946)

Immanuel Kant is also an essential philosopher of war issues. Immanuel Kant lived through two pivotal historical events: the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783) and the French Revolution (1789-1799), expressing sympathy for each. In his book *The Conflict of the Faculties*, of 1798, written during the French Revolution, he said that this revolution "finds in the hearts of all spectators a wishful participation that borders closely on enthusiasm" (1979, pp. 153-154) and went on to argue that, because of its republicanism, its national constitution, "by its very nature, avoids principles permitting offensive war" (Kant, 1979). His support for the American Revolution, which occurred earlier in his career, is also rooted in his concept of republicanism and the idea of moral progress. This support for revolutions in Kant exists despite his argument against popular rebellion. He believed there was no legitimate resistance by the people against sovereigns, even when those sovereigns were unjust.

1 The Churchill Project – Hillsdale College (2016). (Accessed: 18 August 2025).

Following Kant, we turn our attention to the utilitarians – Bentham, James Mill, John Stuart Mill, and Sidgwick – whose ethical frameworks fundamentally challenge Kantian deontology. Their perspectives emphasize the outcomes of actions, promoting a practical approach to morality that stands in stark opposition to the principles set forth by classical and scholastic philosophy, as well as those of Kant. The prominent utilitarian philosophers – Jeremy Bentham, James, and John Stuart Mill – did not directly witness or participate in any wars or conflicts, such as serving as soldiers or being present on battlefields. Instead, they devoted their lives primarily to intellectual pursuits.

Philosophers of all approaches and faiths supported their countries in the First World War. On the German side, the *Manifesto of the Ninety-Three*[2] of 1914 was endorsed by prominent German thinkers and artists, declaring unequivocal support for Germany in the war. It is noteworthy that the manifesto was signed after the so-called Rape of Belgium. The Manifesto said that if it had not been for German militarism, German civilization would have long since been extirpated. In the end, the Manifesto extolled the legacy of the Germans Goethe, Beethoven, and Kant. Would they have signed the Manifesto?

Among the philosophers, the phenomenologist philosopher Max Scheler (2010) was an adamant defender of German aggression at the beginning of the First World War. His two renowned teachers, the philosophers Rudolf Eucken and Edmund Husserl, supported the war as necessary for the German nation. The Protestant Eucken (2014) said that Germany was fighting a just and holy war. The Jew Husserl[3] gave speeches to the German government to encourage the Germans to fight in World War I.

In France, the renowned Jewish philosopher Henri Bergson gave speeches[4] against "Prussianism" (militarism, mechanization, insatiable ambition, scientific barbarism, and a will perverted by pride) in Germany, encouraging French soldiers not to fear, as France would win the war. In England, Charles Masterman, the head of the propaganda office, called a secret meeting of renowned English writers to discuss how they could contribute to the war effort. H. G. Wells, Arthur Conan Doyle, Rudyard Kipling, and G. K. Chesterton were among them.

2 The World War I Document Archive (n.d.) *Manifesto of the Ninety-Three German Intellectuals*. Available at: https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Manifesto_of_the_Ninety-Three_German_Intellectuals (Accessed: 7 October 2025).

3 See, for instance, the article of 1917 "Fichtes Menschheitsideal (Drei Vorlesungen) from Aufsätze und Vorträge". In English at Husserl, E., 1995. "Fichte's ideal of humanity [Three Lectures]", Husserl Studies, 12, pp. 111-133. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01417587 (Accessed: 7 October 2025). (Fichte's ideal of humanity (three lectures).

4 The speeches were published in the 1915 book *La Signification de la Guerre*.

When academics are asked who the greatest philosopher of the last century is, Ludwig Wittgenstein is often among the top contenders. Although Wittgenstein did not write specifically about military conflicts, he served in World War I and was awarded a medal for bravery. It is said that Wittgenstein studied at the same time as Adolf Hitler at the same secondary school in Linz, Austria. But there is no knowledge that they had any close contact. After arriving in Cambridge (United Kingdom) in 1911, he paused his research on philosophy and logic due to the outbreak of the First World War. Wittgenstein volunteered for the Austro-Hungarian army. He was decorated for his bravery on the Eastern Front and against the British Army. He was captured in 1918 on the Italian Front.

During World War I, while a prisoner in Italy, Wittgenstein wrote *Tractatus*, dedicating it to David Hume Pinsent, a mathematician and descendant of philosopher David Hume, who died in a test flight for the Royal Air Force.

In a book of selected notes and aphorisms by Wittgenstein (1998), it is reported that, in 1946, after the Second World War, he suspected that atomic bombs were a salutary invention and even referred to those who were terrified of nuclear bombs as the scum of the *intelligentsia* and philistines.

There is also the interesting case of the philosopher John Rawls, who served as an infantryman in the Pacific War against the Japanese Empire. Rawls was notably active in combat during the New Guinea campaign. For his exemplary actions in this conflict, Rawls was awarded the Bronze Star. Following his service in New Guinea, he was deployed to the Philippines, where he spent several days in the trenches under constant fire. He was later sent to Japan to join the Allied military forces that occupied the country after its surrender. However, he faced a significant setback when he disobeyed a superior's orders, resulting in his demotion from sergeant to private. Despite the considerable impact of the war on Rawls, both personally and philosophically, he wrote relatively little about wars. However, Rawls's position on the Hiroshima bomb can be seen in an article he wrote in 1995 (Rawls, 1998). The article is part of the debates about the fifty years since the bomb was dropped on the Japanese city.

Other prominent philosophers, as British thinkers J.L. Austin and Richard M. Hare, who were influenced by Wittgenstein's language theories, fought in World War II. Austin aided military intelligence for the D-Day invasion (Rowe, 2023), while Hare, an artillery soldier, was a Japanese prisoner of war for three and a half years.

During the Nazi era, some thinkers and philosophers supported Nazism and defended its ethical principles. The most notable example of a philosopher who supported Nazism is Martin Heidegger, a prominent student of the Jewish philosopher Edmund Husserl. Heidegger held anti-Semitic views and accepted Nazi support starting in 1933 when he became the rector of the University of Freiburg. Additionally, proponents of Nazism and Fascism often claimed that certain

philosophers from the past, like Friedrich Nietzsche, aligned with their ideologies. It is frequently argued that Nazism misappropriated Nietzsche's philosophy. His ethical concept of the "*Übermensch*" (superman), his critique of democracy, and his views on herd mentality appear to support the association between Nietzsche and Nazism, even though their original intent is far removed from such an association. On the other hand, throughout the war, some philosophers bravely opposed Nazism, including distinguished German thinkers like Dietrich von Hildebrand and Edith Stein. Additionally, influential voices from outside Germany, such as Albert Camus, Bertrand Russell, and G.K. Chesterton, joined in this condemnation.

### 3. Oversights and Limitations in Ethics of War

After examining the active and doctrinal involvement of various philosophers in war, we shift our focus to the lasting significance of the ethical doctrines of those crucial to the discussion of war. Their insights not only still resonate today but also expose flaws and limitations that invite further exploration, creating valuable opportunities for deeper inquiry into the ethics of modern war.

We can first examine the ethics of war as presented by Thucydides. Thucydides is known for his ethical realism, which emphasizes the strength and pragmatism of the more potent in wartime. However, he did not shy away from highlighting several moral dilemmas faced by combatants, dilemmas that remain relevant in modern armed conflicts.

Thucydides' ethical realism can be used to evaluate the contemporary conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which began in 2022. In his famous Melian Dialogue, Thucydides illustrates the idea that, in wartime, weaker parties have limited options and often must yield to the will of the more powerful. Additionally, Thucydides addresses the concept of preventive war through his account of the *Affair of Epidamnus*.

Russia is considerably larger, wealthier, more populous, and more powerful militarily than Ukraine. It has the largest nuclear arsenal in the world. Ukraine does not possess any nuclear weapons. It once had the third-largest nuclear arsenal but lost this status after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Ukraine is fighting for its survival, while Russia argues that it is engaged in a preventive war, as Ukraine's proximity to Moscow represents a significant threat. The terrain lacks natural barriers, such as mountains, rivers, swamps, or deserts, that could defend Moscow. Furthermore, Ukraine could serve as a staging ground for an invasion of the Volgograd Gap – an area of strategic importance situated between the Black and Caspian Seas, which is critical to Russia's geopolitical and economic security. Russia is particularly aware of the historic Battle of Stalingrad,

during which the Nazis attempted to control this vital stretch of land. Moreover, if a NATO-aligned Ukraine were to dominate Crimea, it would severely restrict Russia's ability to project political, economic, and military power in and out of the Black Sea, effectively transforming it into a NATO-Turkish lake.

However, the current circumstances – encompassing the political context, which includes NATO and the European Union, the military context featuring nuclear threats and drone warfare, and the ideological considerations – were not anticipated by Thucydides. An analysis of the war between Russia and Ukraine, informed by Thucydides, must consider whether his theories remain relevant in these circumstances.

Aristotle and Plato are considered the founding fathers of virtue ethics. This philosophical theory emphasizes moral character traits rather than the norms dictated by moral principles or the consequences of actions with ethical implications. According to virtue ethics, the primary focus of ethics should be on the cultivation of virtues. Plato's four cardinal virtues – wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice – are prominently discussed in *The Republic* and frequently linked to wartime scenarios. Syse (2002) identifies in Book V of *The Republic* criteria for *jus in bello*, such as avoiding the plundering and destruction of enemy territory, and conducting war in a manner that fosters a just and mutually acceptable peace.

However, it is uncommon for philosophers to consider Plato as a just war theorist. Some of Plato's views hinder his perception as an advocate for this theory, including his Greek centrism, his belief that democracy is chaotic, and his vision of a republic that is often regarded as totalitarian, rigid, and elitist. However, how significant are these factors in understanding Plato's approach to war? Also, Plato does not present a systematic theory of just war. However, many other just war theorists also did not provide a comprehensive framework.

In Aristotle's theory, war and peace are integral to the ethical analysis of justice and are essential characteristics of political life. Like everything else, war must also be subject to the teleological conception of politics. The idea of justice in war concerns what Aristotle saw as the nature of things. In this way, a war can be waged to acquire "things useful to life", such as men as slaves. This Aristotelian approach to *jus ad bellum* differs from the Christian approach that takes place from Augustine onwards. However, Aristotle firmly believed that war should be ordered to the highest demands of justice. He influenced subsequent thinking on just war, particularly about the treatment of courage and the distinction between natural and legal justice.

Regarding Augustine, his way of reconciling Christianity with war served as a foundation for future Christian theologians. Thinkers such as Aquinas, Vitoria, Grotius, Luther, and Calvin all owe a debt to Augustine. Augustine saw war as a corrective force in a "fallen" world to restore order and improve society, but not as

a triumph. War, he believed, tempts people to seize power forcibly to achieve peace. Augustine did not write a book solely on war. While *Confessions* and *City of God* are well-known, his views on war are primarily in *Contra Faustum* and his letters to Marcellinus and Boniface. Augustine's just war theory requires an authority to declare war, a just cause to correct injustice, and an intention aimed at peace. He also emphasized mercy and proportionality in warfare.

In *Contra Faustum*, Augustine dismisses concerns about innocent deaths in war as a "cowardly dislike"[5] arguing that the true evil lies in the violence and ambition for power, not the loss of life, including non-combatants. This contrasts with modern philosophers, including Christians, who prioritize protecting non-combatants. Currently, some argue that the Principle of Non-Combatant Immunity (PNCI) within the framework of the Geneva Conventions is "the core value" (Schulzke, 2017, p. 2) of just war theory, or "the central idea of just war." (Gross, 2010, p. 175) However, this perspective is not found in the writings of the author who is considered the father of just war theory.

While Augustine emphasized the foundations of sin, redemption, and grace, Thomas Aquinas concentrated on human nature, the virtues, and the significance of defending the political community for the common good.

Aquinas (1947) addresses war in *Summa Theologica,* Part II-II, Question 40, within the Treatise on Charity, alongside virtues like faith, hope, charity, justice, prudence, fortitude, and temperance. Placing just war under charity, not justice or prudence, highlights whether war violates charity, akin to hatred or greed, revealing his hermeneutics.

Beyond Question 40, Aquinas explores war's morality in other sections: Question 64, Part II-II, covers lawful killing and the Doctrine of Double Effect; Questions 90-97, Part I-II, discuss laws; Question 108, Part II-II, examines revenge; Question 42, Part II-II, addresses sedition and proportionality; and Question 29, Part II-II, defines peace. In Question 2, Part II-II, Article 5, within the Treatise on Faith, he introduces "just war", tying it to defending the common good and considering how weapon choice impacts moral acts.

Few theologians or philosophers fully address all relevant questions in Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* on just war. Most focus on one or two questions, often even overlooking Question 40. For instance, Elizabeth Anscombe, who, in 1939, boldly condemned her own country, the United Kingdom, for engaging in the war against Nazi Germany (Anscombe, 1981), emphasized Question 64 and parts of Question 91, while ignoring Question 40. This approach influenced philosopher Thomas Nagel (1979) when dealing with the Vietnam War.

5 Augustine. *Contra Faustum*. Book XXII Chapter 74. Available at http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/140622.htm. (Accessed: 15 October 2023).

Regarding Francisco de Vitoria, some scholars who analyze international law from non-Western perspectives argue that Vitoria demonstrated a Eurocentric bias, suggesting that he was complicit in colonial power structures, while attempting to justify Spanish interventions in the Americas under the guise of humanitarianism and natural law. The legal scholar, Antony Anghie (2005), illustrates this argument in his book, *Imperialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law*, which emphasizes Third World approaches to international law and the need to reassess traditional views on legal frameworks. Other scholars who engage with decolonial studies adopt Anghie's approach. However, the question remains: can we find doctrines advocating for the protection of universal rights among other thinkers outside of Europe when addressing the clash of civilizations?

Kant's influence remains significant today, especially in schools of thought that are based on legal, democratic, or institutional means of achieving peace. This philosopher´s book, published in 1795, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, addresses the duties of states to prevent war and establish perpetual peace. The author is acknowledged as a philosopher who championed the supremacy of reason, underscoring its importance in human affairs. However, he supported the French Revolution during his lifetime. Revolutions and rebellions are often fueled by human will, desires, and emotions, rather than rational thought.

Kant rejected the just war theory, as developed by thinkers such as Augustine, Aquinas, Francisco de Vitoria, and Hugo Grotius. In his writings, the German philosopher specifically references the jurist Hugo Grotius. Like others, Grotius recognizes war as a natural method for settling disputes between independent and sovereign nations. Kant, on the other hand, argues that the law of nations shall be founded on a federation of free states, because he thinks that humanity's depravity is evident in the unrestrained relations of nations to each other (Kant, 2008, p. 16). The distribution of decision-making power in this Kantian federation of nations is yet to be determined. Historical experiences with the League of Nations and the United Nations have not successfully resolved the persistent issue of war, and the contentious allocation of power within these institutions remains a subject of controversy.

The utilitarian approach is compelling in assessing the justice of actions during war, known as *jus in bello*, as it prioritizes outcomes that maximize overall well-being. John Stuart Mill, considered by many to be the most influential philosopher of utilitarianism, has two essays related to armed conflicts: *A Few Words on Non-Intervention*, published in 1859, and *The Contest in America*, published in 1862. The text on non-intervention is quite interesting in several aspects, even though it does not present the utilitarian approach. Mill bases his work on the need for a high level of ethics that must be adopted by a nation and seeks to establish principles for adopting the doctrine of non-intervention. Although it is not an exhaustive text on the subject, it is relevant because it presents an analysis that is still used today.

What was the ethical justification for World War I? According to traditional war theory, the criterion of authority was satisfied because the nations driven by nationalism entered the war with strong backing from their leaders. However, it is challenging to argue that they had a just cause and intent, except in instances of self-defense. Moreover, the criterion of proportionality, which states that the benefits of war must outweigh its harmful effects, doesn't lend much support to this conflict. Many philosophers dedicated themselves to defending their countries' positions during the war. Philosophical idealism seemed to influence the perspectives of German philosophers, while the need to defeat Prussian militarism motivated the Triple Entente.

World War I is typically characterized as a conflict fueled by imperialist military alliances, whereas World War II was primarily a struggle against Nazi ideology and Japanese imperialism. Both wars witnessed war crimes. However, World War II has horrific records. It was the greatest massacre in human history, a war in which more non-combatants died than combatants and in which the losers, because of their ideologies, killed more than the victors. Notwithstanding, World War II is particularly notorious for the unprecedented atomic bombings that claimed the lives of countless innocent civilians in Japan. This nuclear dilemma not only defined conflict but also sparked an ongoing debate that resonates powerfully in today's world, underscoring the profound implications of warfare and humanity's responsibility for the future.

The historian Niall Ferguson (2006) addressed the question of why Germany, the most intellectually sophisticated country in Europe, accepted Nazi ideology in the 1940s. Germany was an ultramodern nation, home to Europe's most prominent companies, and had by far the best universities in the world. Between 1901 and 1940, more than a quarter of all Nobel Prizes were awarded to Germans. He argued that the *intelligentsia* did not act as an obstacle to Nazism but rather as a supporter. Ferguson (2006) points out that the key to understanding the strength of the Third Reich was the intellectual elite, the men with university degrees who bowed down before a charismatic leader.

If Martin Heidegger is known for his support of Nazism, Edith Stein and Dietrich von Hildebrand, who, like Heidegger, were students of the Jewish philosopher Husserl, are recognized for condemning this ideology in their writings.

The philosopher Edith Stein became a nun in 1922. She was killed in Auschwitz in 1942 and canonized in 1998. In April 1933, she wrote to Pope Pius XI, criticizing his silence on Nazism, noting that Jews and Catholics worldwide awaited the Church's condemnation of the regime's idolatry of race and power, its attack on Jewish heritage, and its contradiction of Christ's teachings (Stein, 1933).

In early 1935, a meeting took place between the German philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand and Eugenio Pacelli, who was to be consecrated Pope Pius XII in 1939.

Von Hildebrand described the meeting in his memoirs on Nazism (Hildebrand, 2014). The future Pope Pius XII told Hildebrand that he hoped that moderate forces within Nazism would control the situation. Hildebrand responded by stating that the moderate elements within Nazism were even more dangerous. He argued that it would be far better for Christians if the Nazis openly displayed their hatred of Christianity, as Nazism is fundamentally incompatible with the Christian faith. Hildebrand warned that Nazism, in its essence, embodies the spirit of the Antichrist.

Outside of Germany, British thinker G.K. Chesterton emerged as a vocal critic of Nazism, even though he passed away in 1936, before the onset of World War II. He criticized Nazism in his 1934 collection Avowals and Denials, denouncing Hitler, Nazism, and racism. Posthumously, Frank Sheed compiled Chesterton's anti-Nazi essays in The End of the Armistice, in which Chesterton even foresaw the Hitler-Stalin pact against Poland and Austria's annexation (Chesterton, 1934).Regarding the ethics of the nuclear bombs dropped on Japan, shortly after their launch in August 1945, two prominent philosophers wrote on the ethical and political implications of atomic advancement: Albert Camus and Bertrand Russell.

Albert Camus is the first philosopher to comment on Hiroshima's atomic bombing. He wrote an article on August 6, 1945, the day of the nuclear attack on Hiroshima, in which he supported the use of the bomb to force Japan's surrender. During World War II, he had joined the French Resistance, writing for an underground newspaper called *Combat*[6], endorsing violence, including the death penalty and purges against traitors and Nazis. Later, he adopted a moderate stance, opposing the death penalty.

Bertrand Russell (1945), in his August 18, 1945, article *The Bomb and Civilization*, praised the bomb's scientific achievement but criticized its moral failure. He hoped it would prompt Japan's surrender and foresaw uranium-driven conflicts. Russell predicted Allied rivalry, noting that only the United States had nuclear weapons at the time, but anticipated Soviet acquisition. He proposed two peace paths: an international uranium authority, which he considered utopian, or U.S.-led global dominance for peace.

It is quite revealing that two philosophers who are usually considered pacifists, such as Camus and Russell, reacted in this way immediately after the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Among philosophers, the subject of World War II and the use of the atomic bomb have always been very controversial.

6 Alexandre de Gramont made the selection and translation of Camus's editorials in Albert Camus, 1991. *Between Hell and Reason*. Translated by Alexandre de Gramont. Wesleyan University Press.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), since 1957, has tried to promote peaceful nuclear use, with no atomic attacks since 1945, despite nine countries developing nuclear power. However, the IAEA lacks robust enforcement, depends on political will, faces geopolitical stalemates, and is criticized for its slow response to violations.

In 1995, Rawls (1998, p. 474), who was in combat during the Second World War, began his article by equating the atomic bomb with other air attacks on Japanese cities that used conventional bombs. Both cases were "serious mistakes", and he bases his argument on the principles that should govern liberal democracies. The aerial bombings against Japan, conventional or with nuclear bombs, for Rawls, do not fit into the idea of "extreme crisis" when war crimes would be justifiable, since the war against Japan was very different from the war against Hitler. With Hitler, there was the possibility of using "extreme crisis" because there was no possibility of political relations with his enemies. For him, this was not the case with Japan.

However, the idea that the Japanese Empire was less brutal than the Nazi regime is not accepted by many historians. The Japanese Empire committed numerous war crimes in the Pacific and Asia. Just as Nazi Germany established Auschwitz, Japan created Unit 731, which involved horrific scientific experiments on the Chinese people. Furthermore, the idea that Japan surrendered due to nuclear attacks is still disputed in the literature.

It is common for philosophers to disregard historical facts to support their approach. To see this clearly, it is sufficient to compare the analyses of philosophers with those of historians regarding the atomic bombs dropped on Japan. Another example is Thomas Nagel on the Vietnam War. Nagel wrote about the Vietnam War in his article *War and Massacre*, initially published in 1972, motivated by the war crime of My Lai in March 1968, carried out by soldiers of the United States. At the time, one could respond to Nagel, even if committing the fallacy of "*tu quoque*", that he should remember that the soldiers of the United States were facing guerrillas who carried out the Massacre of Huế in January of the same 1968, which certainly would have the positive effect of Nagel considering different ethics of war. Philosophers should pay closer attention to historical facts and the diverse ethical frameworks surrounding warfare.

In relation to the recent conflicts involving Islamic terrorism, particularly following the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York, a manifesto (The Washington Post, 2002) was signed by different philosophers in favor of war against what they called "Islamism" present in "40 countries". They believed that the terrorists loathed not only the U.S. government but also the entire way of life in the U.S. The signatories of the manifesto, who represent various religious and moral traditions, including secular viewpoints, express a shared conviction that using God's authority to justify killing or harming others is immoral and goes against true faith in God.

For them, the concept of a "just war" is broadly rooted, drawing from many of the world's diverse religious and secular moral traditions. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim teachings, for example, all would contain profound reflections on the definition of a just war. They argued that wars may not legitimately be fought for national glory, to avenge past wrongs, territorial gain, or any other non-defensive purpose. Then they claimed that in the name of "universal human morality," they supported the U.S. government's and the U.S. society's decision to use force against Islamic terrorism. Each of these affirmations sparks controversy and invites discussion.

Islam has long been a topic of intense debate since medieval times, and it remains a vital discussion in today's society. Terrorism is generally an attack on an innocent civilian population without warning. Nowadays, terrorism is closely associated with Islam, primarily because of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, but several national and ideological groups have adopted the practice of terrorism throughout history.

Furthermore, wars are sometimes regarded as sacred. The concept of a "holy war" has persisted throughout history, even when religion is not a primary factor. For instance, in the ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia, we occasionally hear supporters of both sides labeling it a holy war. The Russian Orthodox Church (2024) claimed that Russia's war against Ukraine (as well as against Western nations) is holy, asserting that Russia acts as a protector against the Antichrist. On the other hand, Pope Francis and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church condemned the war between Russia and Ukraine as a "sacrilegious war" (Souza, 2025).

This war has caused a profound schism within the Orthodox Church, pitting the Russian Orthodox Church, the largest and most influential branch of Orthodoxy, against the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. Despite its historical significance and status as "first among equals" the Ecumenical Patriarchate has a far smaller following. This division not only threatens religious unity but also deepens the wounds of conflict.

The tragic and recurring war between Israel and the Palestinians involves two religions that establish holy wars in their sacred books. It also involves political and social factors, sparking ethical and political debates even outside the region, within Western countries. The conflict often divides philosophers based on their creed or nationality, but this is not always the case. For instance, we have Israeli philosopher David Enoch (2023) and American Jew Michael Walzer (2024), contrasted with Palestinian scholar Edward Said (1979) and American intellectual Noam Chomsky (2023). While primarily religious and historical, philosophers often overlook these roots, leading to a flawed understanding of the conflict's complexities.

## 4. Conclusion

The Platonic and Aristotelian approaches to justice in war remain relevant today in philosophy and politics. The theory of just war, rooted in philosophical and theological foundations, remains widely accepted. Islamic ethics regarding war and terrorism have been a theological and philosophical topic since the religion's inception. Efforts to establish legal frameworks that make engaging in war more challenging are ongoing. The doctrine of non-intervention in sovereign nations remains a matter of controversy, with no clear consensus on how to proceed. These challenges are enduring, reflecting the persistent nature of philosophical inquiry.

The advent of nuclear weapons has introduced a new layer of ethical concern, as their unparalleled destructive potential raises profound questions about the future of warfare. With the advent of atomic weapons, the criterion of proportionality – according to which the benefits of war must outweigh its harmful effects – is significantly undermined, since its use can easily have an impact of an unjustifiable magnitude. Philosophers began examining the implications of the atomic bomb immediately after the Hiroshima attack, with philosophers Albert Camus and Bertrand Russell.

The relationship between philosophy and war is dynamic and complex. War often has its foundations in ethical philosophy, and a philosophical approach is frequently shaped by historical circumstances, which are usually influenced by wars.

From the Peloponnesian War to the more recent conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, various philosophers have addressed the ethics of war. However, many philosophical approaches to war exhibit flaws and gaps, such as overlooking historical facts and theological foundations. Furthermore, philosophers sometimes radically alter their perspectives after wars, disregard the ideas of their predecessors, base their philosophies on ideologies, and even lend support to harmful ideologies.

The political implications of philosophical approaches to war have a complex history. Even philosophers who did not intend to support a war ideology have sometimes been used as theoretical foundations to justify it, as Nazism appropriated Nietzsche.

Although war remains a significant issue, the ethical discussions surrounding it in philosophy are increasingly narrow. Today, political philosophy and ethical discussions are more focused on topics such as social inclusion, environmentalism, and contemporary ideologies. It is also essential to rediscover and appreciate the vast body of work on the ethics of war in philosophy. The gaps, flaws, ideologies, and theoretical foundations present valuable opportunities for ethical studies conducted by scholars from various backgrounds.

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