

Question 8: Is there such a thing as a just war?

I have no doubt that this question is on the minds of many people. I would also argue that the gut reaction of a military person will be drastically different from that of a non-military person, and even more different if the person is a pacifist. The ultimate problem is that we need language to help us dialogue about this issue and let that discussion guide us into good decisions. The above question has a number of problems in it that is worthy of some prefatory remarks. The question is overly wordy, and that was intentional. Another way of phrasing the same question is “Can there be a just war?” But the ultimate goal is to determine whether we can justify the actions of war. Therefore I phrased this question intentionally to draw out the deeper meanings of justice and justification.

Justification:

Justification is not justice. Justification is a moral theology term for determining whether an action is morally licit or whether a person is morally culpable for an action. Justice is protecting or establishing rights for a person. These two terms are in no way synonymous. Therefore this document will not focus on justice but justification.

How do we justify an action?

This question is incredibly complicated. In order to justify an action – to prove whether a person is morally culpable for an action – we need to venture into moral theology. The morality of an action is bounded by three aspects of the issue: action, circumstances, and intention. The action is defined as the action that the person in the scenario is doing. I will give an example of this after I finish defining the three parts. An action can be morally good, neutral, or evil. Very few actions are morally neutral. Morally good and evil actions are based on the action themselves as set by divine law. A few examples. Murder is morally evil. Saving the life of another person is considered morally good. If the action is morally evil, then the whole issue is morally evil. If the action is morally neutral or good, then we can continue our quest to find whether the issue at hand is morally licit. The intention is what the person intends to do. Although a person may kill another person, the killer’s intention could be self-defense, accidental, attempting to cure, or murder. The intention of the person directly affects the moral liceity of the issue. Circumstances looks at the wider picture around the event. If the person is conditioned to use violence as a means of problem solving, this would affect the way we understand the culpability of the action.

Example: Would it be morally licit for me to steal a loaf of bread from the store? The action is to take a loaf of bread. Taking a loaf of bread is a morally neutral action; no moral character is attached to this action. Since the action is morally neutral, we can continue. If the intention of the person is to steal – take something without paying for it, then this would be immoral. If the person intended to pay for the bread but forgot, then the moral culpability is greatly reduced because the person did not intend to steal. If the person intends to feed their family by stealing the loaf of bread because they cannot pay for it, then the situation increases in complexity. If we take the final intention – stealing the bread to feed the family, we need to examine the circumstances around the action. Could the person find another means of feeding his/her family? Are there other resources? Are there reasons why the person cannot afford a loaf of bread? If the

person does not want to use the other means such as food banks, the moral culpability increases since they are choosing to steal. If the family is in a rural town without any other resources, then the culpability decreases. If the person is a gambling addict and lost all the family money so that he/she cannot afford food, then the moral character becomes complicated. The action, intention, and circumstances of a situation greatly color the moral culpability of a person for doing a specific action.

Morality of War:

Now that we have established some basic principles for determining moral action and the moral character of a situation, we can venture into the morality of war. War is very complicated. Many different techniques and instruments are used to accomplish a specific plan or objective. I want to start with some simple scenarios to help us grasp the complexities of war. Centuries ago war was much less complicated. Two armies would head out of the town into a field or open area and the soldiers would fight. In this simple situation the people engaged in war are those who are trained for war and have agreed to the actions they are doing, namely killing other humans. Generally, killing another human is considered immoral. In this situation I would argue that the action of an individual soldier is fighting another soldier. The intention behind that action could be defense of their family, honor or glory, thrill of battle, a form of work, or the desire to kill other humans. Only the final intention is considered immoral. This battle takes place away from a city, and thus innocent civilians, only involves those who are trained to fight, those fighting are part of a larger collective, those fighting are encouraged to do so by their reigning authority, and a specific outcome needs to be reached which initiated this battle. These circumstances factor into whether this battle is considered moral. If the king desired the land of another king and thus engaged in war, then the needs of the king are now in conflict with the lives of those who fought in the battle. The lives of the soldiers are more important than the real estate of the king. If another king is marching against the king and trying to conquer his land, then the battle is fought in self-defense, which is morally licit.

Let's change the situation. This battle is now being waged against a castle. I am the king who ordered the destruction of an enemy castle the king of whom I am openly in disagreement. Inside the castle are innocent civilians who are trapped inside with limited food and water and may become the unarmed enemies of my soldiers. Is this a morally licit battle? The changes in this situation from the first one are the following: I am engaging in war against someone because I don't like them, the battle is against a castle, civilians live in the castle who are not soldiers. If I fight the civilians, this is immoral because they are not trained soldiers who intend to fight. If I starve the city, I am encouraging them to die. This battle is less moral than the first battle. A person could argue that this battle is considered immoral due to the intention and the circumstances.

Modern war:

Modern wars are fought very differently from wars in the past. The invention of rifles, explosives, and tactical weapons change the type of fighting, the location of the fighting, and the casualties of war. The exploration of the tactics of war could encompass volumes. Therefore, I

am going to limit the discussion of these instruments of war: rifles, explosives, and tactical weapons.

Rifles: the invention of rifles changes the level of damage caused to an individual and the way that soldiers fight. Combat is no longer between two people who can see the faces of each other but at long ranges where the humanity of the other person is assumed. Thus those who fight with rifles are assuming that the object in their sights is another soldier. Rifles can be a more effective way of killing. They cause explosive damage that leads to massive bleeding and organ damage causing swift death. Rifles have increased in accuracy, which leads to fewer mutilations and less suffering from those who are shot by a rifle. The scope of a rifle is relative small, the area that is affected by the explosion of the bullet.

Explosives: explosives are far different from rifles. Some explosives are more random in their affected area such as hand grenades that are thrown into an area. Some explosives are ranged and can be shot with a certain level of accuracy. Explosives, in general, cause area damage. A soldier cannot control the number of types of people affected by explosives. The range and scope take out everyone and everything within a certain range given the power and type of explosive. Therefore the damage caused by explosives is uncontrolled and not specific to people. Buildings and land are affected by explosives.

Tactical weapons: tactical weapons are the most specialized of the three groups of weapons. The difference between explosives and tactical weapons could be negligent. Some weapons I include in this group are nuclear weapon, ballistic missiles, and interception devices. All of these weapons use a level of precision and scope unlike the other two groups. Although they cause area damage and their scope is usually rather large, the focus of these weapons is the use of technology to implement their destructive nature. The advent of technology is beginning to remove the soldier from the battlefield and focus on long-range weapons focused on large-scale destruction. Now not only can the soldier not see the body of the individual he/she is fighting, but doesn't even know who they are fighting. Tactical weapons removes the person from the destruction caused and focuses on the destroying of a given people/place/area.

In general, weapons that cause the loss of lives of civilians is considered immoral. Weapons that lead to the destruction of land, crops, or natural resources are considered immoral.

Reasons for war:

In the previous section we looked at the way war is fought and the implications of the use of technology for war. In this section I want to go back to the opening discussion on morality and examine the causes of war as justification for war. The reasons for war can be divided into three camps: destroying the other, for a cause, for self-defense.

Destroying the other: In modern society you will never hear this used as a reason because the people will rebel against it. We know the immorality of fighting a war for war's sake. Nevertheless this is one of the reasons for war: I am fighting a war to show my power, take over a country, or because I enjoy the energy of war. This reason for war is almost always considered immoral because the intention of the war is to kill another person without due cause.

For a cause: This reason for war is the most heavily nuanced and complicated of the reasons for war. The cause for war can range from a need for resources, to genocide or mass extermination, i.e. justice, economic profit, fear. I would find it very difficult to justify the killing of many people and the taking of their land for the sake of resources. That being said, I can also see a situation where this could be morally licit. I need a specific resource to make a drug that will save the lives of my citizens. All of my negotiations attempts have failed, the other country is not willing to sell it, and I have no other way to gain this resource. In order to save the lives of my citizens I engage in war. Genocide and mass extermination are rather tricky reasons for war. Although we want to stop any form of discrimination and especially a genocide, state sovereignty protects nations from war. I think that a case could be made for justifying war for the sake of the oppressed people given that certain conditions of war are kept. I could not justify a war for the sake of saving those oppressed while using nuclear weapons that destroy all the major cities. Economic profit and fear are also heavily nuanced and dependent on the circumstances. All of the causes that fit into the “for a cause” category are dependent on the circumstances and the type of war to determine their moral character.

For self-defense: the reason for the preservation of self or self-defense is almost always considered a non-morally culpable choice. Notice I said almost always. Although the reason is a valid and moral reason for war, the circumstances that lead to self-defense and the circumstance of fighting may lead to an immoral battle situation. Similarly, defending an argument for war in self-defense is rather complicated. If the enemy is in your country, self-defense is automatically assumed. But if the enemy is in another country, what is meant by self-defense?

Is there such a thing as a just war?

The core question that underlies this question is the following: is there a type of war in which the intentions and circumstances justify the casualties of war? From the above description the answer is yes. There is a situation in which war would be a justifiable action. This situation is highly nuanced and rather complex. In general the central issue in discussing just war is, can we justify the act of killing people for a cause? And that, is the debate.