



Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument With Historical Illustrations

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From the Athenian attack on Melos to the My Lai Massacre, from the wars in the Balkans through the first war in Iraq, Michael Walzer examines the moral issues surrounding military theory, war crimes, and the spoils of war. He studies a variety of conflicts over the course of history, as well as the testimony of those who have been most directly involved--participants, decision makers, and victims. In his introduction to this new edition, Walzer specifically addresses the moral issues surrounding the war in and occupation of Iraq, reminding us once again that "the argument about war and justice is still a political and moral necessity."

Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument With Historical Illustrations Details

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From Reader Review Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument With Historical Illustrations for online ebook

Ahmed says

More journalism than philosophy, alternating between mushy and dangerous. Rather than a curb on the conduct of war, it provides rhetorical cover for empire and an extremely useful apology for power. [Notice for instance, G.W. Bush's justification for the invasion of Iraq, drawing on language from Walzer.] It makes no contribution to an understanding of the ethics of war, because it only rehashes the current regime of international law of war. An example of its flimsiness, note how W's reference to Deutronomy on the "use" of captured women attempts to make the text do what it cannot possibly do, show a "universal respect for non-combatants" that was certainly not true in 750 BCE. In short the book is ahistorical, silent on the workings of power, especially asymmetric warfare, and, most importantly privileges military testimony. Since civilian casualties are irrelevant so long as they were not directly targeted and the strike "necessary," the word of those doing the killing are taken as the final word of whether they were necessary.

Johnny says

When I was in college, my major was Peace, War, and Defense. One of the required courses for the major was called "Philosophy of Peace, War, and Defense. Sadly, this book was not on our reading list. I assume it was because of when I was in college (mid 90s). Due to the end of the Cold War but yet before 9/11, our main philosophical discussion was on the democratization of other countries as a way to a permanent peace. But this book doesn't really delve into that, it's main concern in interplay of morality and war at international, internal/domestic, and military level. His arguments are well thought out and his use of and further examination of historical events are both illuminating and thought provoking. If I had one major concern was that although the book, originally written in 1976 but updated in 2005, skims over the aspect of terrorism in our society today and the effect of 9/11 on our understanding views on aspects of rules/convention of war and morality.

Chris Marsh says

I read this as required reading during my second year of studies at West Point. We read this along with Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War.

Although it's subtitle is "A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations" it does not present a coherent argument. The logic is circular and the argument falls in on itself.

In the end, perhaps Thucydides was right: "The strong do as they can, while the weak do as they must"

John Hess says

An important book. Few will come away agreeing with everything that Walzer has to say, but his arguments are so compelling-and his command of military history so formidable-that one's beliefs about the morality of war are certain to be refined if not wholly reconsidered by the end.

Generally, Walzer attributes too much significance to the meaningful nature of the national community and fails to consider the psychological or emotive appeal of violence in war. These are really my only two major objections.

Sarah (Gutierrez) Myers says

Discussions of the justice of war generally make a distinction between *jus ad bellum* (just war) and *jus in bello* (justice in the war). In this book, Michael Walzer does not make any great attempt to deal with *jus ad bellum*; he takes the principle that resistance to aggression is the basis for a just war as his starting point, and the majority of the book is devoted to the rules of war, that is, how to fight justly in war. If you, like me, have doubts about the justice of war, period, or were looking for a critique of or response to pacifism, that's a different book. I am trying not to blame the author for not writing that other book (or maybe he did, and I haven't found it). In this book, Walzer's more central contention is that war is an activity which can be restrained by just boundaries, as opposed to the notion that war is simply a horrific monster, which once unleashed cannot consistently be contained by any moral code.

There was still a lot here to appreciate. Walzer has clearly done his research and every chapter is peppered with historical and literary examples. (In one place he even references a rather obscure Shakespeare play, King John, to illustrate the subject's duty to make some protest to an unjust command.) Walzer also brought up some examples from earlier periods to illustrate that not everything we might have taken to be a feature of modern wars is necessarily a new thing under the sun; siege warfare, for example, has much in common with total war in modern times.

On the other hand, Walzer seems to be relying on an undefined theory of rights (possibly identifiable with western liberalism), which is never presented clearly and argued for. He generally rejects utilitarianism in war, in favor of respecting the war convention and the rights it gives to noncombatants, but at the end he is willing to grant that extremely desperate circumstances justify the utilitarian argument against all civilian rights. (So for him, the a-bombs were an injustice because they killed hundreds of thousands of civilians in a situation which was not immediately dangerous enough to require such an action.) He wants to say that in most cases soldiers simply have to accept the increased difficulties and dangers that come with trying to keep civilians safe, but if the situation becomes grave enough, all's not fair exactly, but you have to do it even if it not's fair--though the people who do it are not praiseworthy.

All in all, a book that raised more interesting questions than I was expecting, but ultimately gave unsatisfying answers to those questions.

Kremlin says

It's not normal for me to take over a month to read just 300 pages, so that prefaces how difficult it was for me to finish this book.

This is a textbook, glorified. I found that towards the end the author used "I" too much, and that made this lose its credibility imo.

Would I recommend? Not really, unless you need something to help you fall asleep.

Kathryn says

I began reading this book on July 21, 2009, having borrowed it from my son's girlfriend; now, on October 14, 2009, I have completed my reading of this book. It was not that I didn't like the book that took me so long to read it; my problem was that it was a good book that also took concentrated effort to read, and concentrated effort to read was something that was in rather short supply for the past few months. But, I have completed my reading of the book; and, since I got a brand-new copy to return to my son's girlfriend (the reading copy I borrowed from her is rather beat-up), I am glad to have my own copy of this work, as it was a book I liked, and liked very much.

The work is divided into Four Parts and an Afterword. Part One deals with The Moral Reality of War, dealing with topics like The Crime of War (taking General Sherman and the Burning of Atlanta as an illustration of his points) and The Rules of War. Part Two is The Theory of Aggression, with such items as Law and Order in International Society, and Interventions (as in the American War in Vietnam). Part Three, The War Convention, concerns topics such as Noncombatant Immunity and Military Necessity, Guerrilla War, Terrorism, and Reprisals. Part Four concerns itself with Dilemmas of War: Aggression and Neutrality, Supreme Emergency, and Nuclear Deterrence. Part Five deals with The Question of Responsibility, as in The Crime of Aggression: Political Leaders and Citizens, and War Crimes: Soldiers and Their Officers (the My Lai Massacre). Finally, the Afterward covers the topic Nonviolence and the Theory of War.

I find it is well nigh impossible to summarize the author's writings in this book. Part of the problem is that I spent such a long time reading this book that it is difficult to recall what impressed me in the earlier chapters; and part of it is that the whole question of Just and Unjust Wars, with all their moral problems, is a huge territory to cover.

War is pretty much a given in our world; and war works under different rules than ordinary life. (If I take a gun and kill someone, meaning to kill him, it is murder of some kind – but if I am a soldier and kill an enemy combatant, then it is not murder.) All military systems train soldiers to obey orders without question – except that one is not supposed to obey an order that is immoral. In many ways, immorality in war, either in why it is being waged in a particular instance, or how it is being waged in a particular instance, is a judgement call – which is why war crimes trials of various kinds are so controversial. (The Allies won in World War II, so the Allies got to have War Crimes Trials on German and Japanese military and government figures; if the Axis had won, surely they would have War Crimes Trials on Allied military and government figures.)

This is a book with applicability in both the consideration of past wars (those who forget the past are indeed compelled to repeat it) and for current and future wars; for as we are not in a perfect world, there will be future wars, and one would hope that if we must be in wars, that we will be in them for the right reasons, and behave morally in those wars.

Tim says

A hardcore philosophy text lightened up with a generous helping of historical examples. The book apparently grew out of the author's experience in the anti-Vietnam War movement, and chapter by chapter, he explores the different aspects of what might make a war just or unjust. Not surprisingly there are a lot of different angles to the problem, from the justice of the conflict itself, to justice in the way it is fought.

Perhaps the deepest section is the first, where he takes seriously our collective intuitions about why certain wars are in fact "unjust" in some sense, arguing against the "realist" position which says that war is hell and any attempt to moralize about it is misguided. Walzer's treatment of the question is at times indirect and unsatisfying, but I think he is ultimately correct when he points out that no one truly acts or thinks like a realist, so we may as well engage with war on the merits. Not every section here is convincing, and of course every reader will approach the book with strong political priors. He often lives or dies on the historical examples he chooses (heavy on Vietnam and WW2), but at the very least his framing and dissection of the problem produces a lot of food for thought.

Phoenix says

De Morabilis Bellum - Regarding the Morality of War

Erudite, scholarly, thoughtful and definitively relevant examination of codes of conduct wrt to going to war - jus ad bellum, and conduct in a war - jus in bello. Walzer's personal journey emerged first from his opposition to US actions in Vietnam but led to an examination of the pursuit of war from Thucydides to modernity.

War invites barbarism, breaking both law and permissibility. Against this Walzer notes that circumstances do allow for rules of engagement, for example chivalry, respect for civilians, captured and injured opponents, appeals to necessity, treatment of hostages, relationship towards neutral parties. Action does not occur in a vacuum and context can make a difference. Walzer draws on emblematic historic examples such as the dilemmas embedded conflict, avoidance of total war, treatment of captives and civilian populations, who is or is not immune from attack (yes to weapons manufacturers, no to those packaging rations; surprising no to sentries who should be captured or driven in) and under what circumstances, and signalling that there are consequences of breaching the limits of moral behaviour. Walzer broaches the concept of pursuing the lesser evil with trepidation, confronting acts such as the creation of fire storms in German cities by Britain's Bomber Command as reprisals for German bombing of British cities, Hiroshima and the shooting of hostages as a signal to the enemy to stop a similar practice. Particularly intriguing from a moral stance were the questions of strategy, for example the use of siege which seeks to break the will of opponent forces by burdening them with suffering of the resident population - does one funnel refugees to the besieged city, does one blockade food; do you respect neutrality (ie: the Scandinavian countries in WW II) when doing so favours one's opponent (the Germans sourced much of their ore from Norway.), and given that your opponent did not do the same when it was to their advantage? (Hitler's advance through Belgium.)

Walzer's ideas are very much of our time, one also sees changes since publication in the late 1970s, a slight parallax, which sets him off from the ideas of the past and from the evolving view of the present, ie: while one starts with consideration of intervention there are those who would make it a right (RPT), a position most nations have treated with caution. Walzer is neither the first nor the last word but he is thorough and his

ideas present an excellent framework for an ethical exploration of the political and military decisions from a Western POV. And at the end that he considers pacifism and non-violence. Not all viewpoints are discussed, for example he does not discuss the Hindu precepts of ethical war (dharma-yuddha) but neither are there explorations considering the warrior ethics of the Mongols or native Americans, nor medieval justifications for war in pursuit of tribute.

The sections are well organized and the language is clear and understandable, making this a modern classic that one can expect to return to on the issues of war. The only improvement would be an edition with commentary and responses by other authors; alternatively this is the sort of book that lends itself, in the right hands, to college and university courses Highly recommended!

Mike Gaeta says

This author pulls from an eclectic group of historical variety regarding what constitutes a just war, and firstly, whether there is such a thing as a just war. From aquinas to JS Mill, it puts into perspective the reasons behind each philosophy in doing so. It's not so much a survey but more so an amalgamation of different views which constitute his own.

Jim says

If you read only one book on the morality of war, this should be the one. Walzer is the preeminent modern Just War Theorist, and this is still the definitive text on the subject - even if you don't agree with its entirety. I certainly don't.

If you are an "absolute pacifist," you have to answer why it would be morally justifiable to stand and watch the unmitigated horrors of genocide that have gone on throughout history without end other than force of war, and Walzer gives many examples here. Walzer, respectfully, challenges Ghandi stating that an army would not be repelled by its own sense of horror in mowing over millions of innocents, if that sense is absent or has been removed by the collective reprogramming of the state. Unfortunately, the Holocaust, was neither the first, nor the last such case in point, and Walzer uses Cambodia as a more recent example. If you realize this and say you are a "contingent pacifist," like Einstein and Russell, who would admit that "some circumstances call for war," well, then, you may as well claim to be a Just War Theorist. That way you can call upon a long, evolutionary history of what defines just and unjust causes for war and its prosecution. Walzer details that history and its rationality brilliantly.

If you are a so-called "realist," who makes a point of saying there is no such thing as an "unjust" cause for war, as long as you reasonably decide that it is in your own best interest, you are entitled to your opinion. However, you have to admit that anyone else could claim the same, no matter how ridiculous it may sound - and therein lies the rub: most people actually do call some reasons "ridiculous." We live in a world that actually behaves as if it has a desire for being moral, not one that lives as if it doesn't! Modern Just War Theory, including Walzer, admits that there may not be easy answers to what determines "normative" behavior on an international scale, but we do have to start somewhere, and do so through the spirit of cooperation and consensus that has been built up over centuries. If we don't, we all may as well go back to living in caves and cry "it's every man for himself."

FiveBooks says

Professor Mary Kaldor of LSE has chosen to discuss Michael Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument With Historical Illustrations*, on FiveBooks as one of the top five on her subject - War, saying that:

“... This is another classic. He is a philosopher and he wrote it after the Vietnam war asking the question – is war ever just?... The just cause nowadays, according to Walzer, is self-defence against aggression.... There is the distinction between the non-combatant and the combatant. Non-combatants, such as prisoners of war, old men, women and children, are to be protected and there are all kinds of rules about what we now call “collateral damage” which means that the collateral damage has to be proportionate – the cause has to be worthwhile enough that it doesn't matter if you kill a few people. What Walzer does is to outline a set of principles that have been developed over centuries. ...”

The full interview is available here: <http://five-books.com/interviews/mary-kaldor>

Andrewh says

This has long been the uber-text of Just War theory, despite being written in 1977, long before the end of the bipolar Cold War and the 21st-century complications of international terrorism and the 'responsibility to protect'. As such, it does read very much like a book from a past era for much of the time, and the publishers have not made a huge effort to update the 4th edition - it has a (short) new preface in which Walzer comes out against regime change of the Iraq sort. The book is superbly erudite and well written, effortlessly covering the complex arguments thrown up by centuries of war, and making finely grained pronouncements on the ethics of conflict. Unfortunately, much of it seems very outdated now and I think he might have been encouraged to write at least one full chapters on the War on Terror and the issues of the post-cold war world, which are more difficult to judge than those of, say, World War II, the most oft-cited example of a just war (though not fought justly at the end, as Walzer points out - the H-Bomb 'exploded the theory of just war', just as the threat of international nuclear terrorism may also, others may argue).

Foreign Grid says

Interesting

A very popular book on Just War theory although the writing can be less persuasive in later chapters. Still quite educational however. The first chapter made it well worth it.

Hadrian says

An interesting and only too pertinent analysis of the morality of wars. Views on states, the individual soldier, etc. Initially written as a response to Vietnam, but some can very easily compare it to Libya or Afghanistan.

Good use of historical examples.

Relstuart says

I thought the initial portion of the book asks some good questions and contains some thought provoking analysis.

However, towards the latter part of the book I found myself disagreeing with the author about the WWII strategic bombing campaign and the use of nuclear devices in Japan. Two general things I did not feel he took into account are the differences in total war vs limited engagement (World war with entire nations using all elements of society to support the war effort vs a fraction of society committed to the war effort). The second issue is the judgment of the past by the standards of the present.

I wanted more info on the WWII bombing campaign from the position of the people who defended it. He mentions those people but I don't feel he gave me good info on why they felt the strategic bombing campaign was appropriate. He gives his opinion early in the discussion by calling the allied bombing campaign "terror bombing" over and over.

A specific issue I didn't agree with the author was his dismissiveness of the evil of the WWII era Japanese empire. He feels there is no comparison between the Japanese and the Germans from a moral standpoint and considers the Germans infinitely worse. My great-grandparents fled Indonesia to go back to Holland because they felt the Germans in general were not as evil as the Japanese. A review of the atrocities by the Japanese reveal a terrifying record of genocide and death that earns them a ranking among the worst in the WWII axis of evil.

I recommend Paul Tibbets book on his life and dropping the bomb titled (The Return of the Enola Gay) for a defense of dropping the bomb from someone who was part of the situation.

Arvin Pamplona says

Good read if you have a general knowledge of Aquinas and just war theory.

Maria says

Walzer examines the ethics of fighting war for countries and for individuals. First published in 1977 he was far kinder to drafted soldiers than their political leaders. With specific historical examples, Walzer leads the reader thru the moral questions of starting, fighting and finishing a war.

Why I started this book: I'm tackling my pile of professional reading and this one was in audio!

Why I finished it: I haven't read many philosophy books and so it took me a while to get use to the language and jargon. However it was the sections that I didn't agree with that sparked the most thought on my part. Walzer is clear in his arguments and I was forced to straighten out my own thoughts and opinions in

response. I completely agree that Just and Unjust Wars are a topic that need to be debated, that we need to have this conversation as part of national politics. That as citizens there is a collective responsibility to hold ourselves and our leaders accountable for unethical actions and conflicts. So here is my part of the conversation:

Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Walzer believes that dropping the Atomic Bomb on Hiroshima was a moral mistake and unethical because it targeted civilians. He thinks that the forced prolongation of the war in demanding Japan's unconditional surrender violated international laws of sovereignty. And that the slaughter of civilians in the air raids over other Japanese cities was just as bad. (In his defense he also argues against these raids in Europe too.) And that saying the Atomic bombs stopped the fire bombing isn't a moral justification.

Moral assumptions:

1. Japan was losing and all America had to do was wait them out. They didn't need to continue inflicting massive damage on the country.
2. All air bombing is morally wrong
3. Japanese civilians suffered unproportionally.
4. Japanese military targets could be hit without targeting civilians working and living next door.

Rebuttal: Hindsight covers all historical arguments and I will try to be explicit about mine. I was born just as the Cold War was ending. I never had to nuclear drills at school... we did active shooter but that's another story. So I was never scared that another country would do to us, what we did to Japan. Additional sources including Japanese have been uncovered and analyzed since 1977.

Historical setting:

1. Japan at the time of the atomic bombing still had over one million men in uniform continually fighting to conquer China. This force was expected to return to Japan to fight in the country's last stand.
 - a. In both public broadcasts to the Japanese civilians and in the intercepted coded messages that the Americans were reading, the Japanese government was urging its citizens to fight to the end; to commit to taking an invading American soldier to the grave with them. American services members had been unable to prevent massive civilian suicides in Okinawa. It was hard on morale and planners feared that it would be worse on the main Japanese islands.
 - b. The Japanese attempt at negotiated peace thru Russia with the Allies rested on the assumption that they could retain all conquered parts of China and Korea. Would it be ethical for the U.S. to abandon its war time ally Chiang Kai-shek for a separate peace, leaving Japan with Chinese territory?
 - c. The Japanese had opened negotiations with the U.S. right before bombing Pearl Harbor. In fact, their ambassador was delayed in delivering the declaration of war when these negotiations fell thru which was part of the outrage of the attack on Hawaii. We had been attacked without a declaration of war. American leaders had no way of knowing if the Japanese desire for peace and negotiations with the Russians was sincere or if it was just another political tactic.
 - c. Finally is a person morally responsible for stopping a fight, in order to protect his opponent from further damage when the opponent is declaring openly and secretly his determination to continue? Must a country or an individual use non-lethal force against a determined attacker? At what point can a person or country force is the only way?
2. While all air bombing might be morally wrong; each country bombed others. Hitler hit London with V2 rockets, Britain retaliated with bombing runs to German cities. The Americans bombed everyone and the Japanese bombed their opponents too. And I'm not just talking about Pearl Harbor. Implicit in the argument was that Japanese civilians were specifically targeted while the Japanese limited themselves to military

targets. Not so, and it was technical and supply issues more than moral standards that limited the Japanese. During the 1930s the Japanese bombed Chinese cities. And they also launch "Fire Balloons" basically hot balloons tied to bombs relying on the Pacific Jet stream to blow them to cities and forests in Canada and America. And they are still out in the woods, 70 years later.

a. The Americans had 3 ways to continue the war. The Navy argued against invasion of the home islands. They wanted to blockade Japan and starve them into surrender. The Army Air was determined to bomb them into submission and the Marines and the Army was preparing for full invasion. Walzer talked about the ethics of sieges in an earlier chapter. He argued the immorality of blockades too. To him, the ethical question is then is it better to starve 71,998,104 Japanese or to kill 146,000 in Hiroshima and 80,000 in Nagasaki is mute. It is better and morally justifiable to send soldiers into harms way because only boots on the ground can prevent civilian causalities. Once again the issue of Okinawa and the mass suicides because the American troops were there.

3. China.

a. The Japanese were very lucky that rise of communism in China made the Americans less likely to emphasize their suffering at the hands of the Japanese government. And instead emphasized the importance of the new alliance with Japan and South Korea.

4. Americans warned Japanese civilians to flee the cities and the military targets that they contained. The Japanese government encouraged middle school youth to volunteer at factories to help the war effort. Many Japanese children died immediately in Hiroshima because they were outside clearing firebreaks on the morning the bomb fell.

My opinion was that the bomb was necessary. It has been formed over the course of reading many books on the subject and I will change my mind if presented with new information. I recommend reading Hiroshima Nagasaki: The Real Story of the Atomic Bombings and Their Aftermath, Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan, Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II, and Bomb: The Race to Build—and Steal—the World's Most Dangerous Weapon to start. Leave me a recommendation if you know of other books.

The hard thing about history is that you can't rewind time and play it the other way, with a different decision to see which option ended with the least suffering. Walzer's entire book presented the reader with the question is more ethical to end the war immediately with horrible no holds barred fighting or is it better to fight on limits to preserve as much as you can? Each of us will draw the line at a different point... which is why we must wrestle with the ethics of war before a conflict is started, while we fight and long after as we care for the survivors.

Tom Schulte says

I read a lot of history. I figure, conservatively, I have read hundreds of nonfiction histories. From my own assessment, I doubt in cost of human life (potential), wealth—"blood and treasure"—that no more human expenditure has been made than that of warring of one group upon another. To what end? Written in reaction to the Vietnam war, this considered and though-provoking work is an overview of war and war situations decided from Thucydides to Vietnam and considering the morality of each. Considering this era of Global War on Terrorism how long not only terrorism but the consideration of warring on non-state actors has been with us. None is settled, really, so I guess as it is said in Ecclesiastes 1:9 -

"What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun."

Aaron Crofut says

This book, considered a must read in the field of just war theory, left me unimpressed. Everything is based on a system of morality that is never really explained save for an unexplained theory of rights that people supposedly have under various circumstances. Where do these rights come from?

The short of it is, I'm never going to buy the argument that people attacked have to put their own in harm's way for the sake of the attackers. The agent problem is worth deep consideration (can we hold a people accountable for their government's actions?) but Walzer does not even come close to answering it in an acceptable way.

Sherman was right; war is hell. Walzer never really answers the big question: what benefit do we gain by fighting in accordance his "moral" ideas of war? Without an answer, this is all just so much fluffery.

That all said, Walzer does write very well and raises many, many questions that need to be examined. This is a very complex subject. Walzer will make you think, especially if you disagree with him.
