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DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF PHILOSOPHY

The Just War Between Theory and Practice

Is the just war really just?

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2026

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Keywords: Just War Theory, Jus ad Bellum, Jus in Bello, Jus post Bellum, Ethics of War, Humanitarian Intervention, Armed Conflict, Just Cause, Proportionality, Legitimate Authority, Right Intention, Last Resort, Principle of Distinction, Double Effect, Reconciliation, Reparations, International Humanitarian Law, Human Rights, Civilian Protection, Women in Armed Conflict, Children in Armed Conflict, Psychological Trauma, Just Peace.

This dissertation examines one of the most enduring, complex, and morally charged concepts in the history of human thought—the concept of Just War. It does so from a dual perspective that engages simultaneously with the theoretical and philosophical framework of Just War Theory and the painful, lived realities that armed conflicts produce in human societies. The central question driving this research is both simple in its formulation and profoundly challenging in its implications: Is the just war truly just? This question is not merely an academic exercise in political philosophy or legal theory; rather, it is a moral imperative that emerges from the reality of a world in which wars continue to be waged, justified, and rationalized in the name of justice, rights, and human values—while leaving behind destruction, suffering, and trauma that no ethical framework can fully account for or repair.

Throughout history, war has been an inseparable part of human existence. At every stage of recorded history, one encounters a war or a series of wars, as human societies have repeatedly experienced conflicts, military interventions, and cycles of violence that seem to resist resolution. This persistent reality raises profound ethical and philosophical questions concerning justice, legitimacy, and human suffering. Within this war-filled reality, the concept of just war emerged as an attempt to reconcile the harsh reality of warfare with moral and humanitarian imperatives. It represents an effort to establish a set of conditions that ethically justify certain types of wars, as well as a set of principles that should govern conduct during war and in its aftermath. Accordingly, Just War Theory constitutes a philosophical and ethical framework that seeks to restrict the use of armed force to specific cases and to regulate armed conflicts in accordance with principles of justice and humanity. It aims, for example, to reconcile the right to self-defense with the preservation of moral values and legal constraints, and to ensure that even when violence is deemed necessary, it is exercised within boundaries that respect human dignity and minimize unnecessary harm.

Despite the apparent clarity of the theoretical principles of Just War Theory, significant challenges arise when these principles are applied in practice. These challenges include determining what constitutes a legitimate cause for war and ensuring its seriousness and sincerity; identifying legitimate authorities and verifying that their intentions are genuinely directed toward justice rather than political gain or self-interest; assessing proportionality and the nature of the harm caused by military operations; and extending ethical considerations to the post-conflict phase, including reconstruction efforts, the provision of reparations to victims, and the achievement of a

genuine and lasting peace. The theory, however carefully constructed, cannot escape the fundamental tension between its noble aspirations and the brutal realities of armed conflict.

The central problematic addressed in this research concerns the extent to which Just War Theory is capable of reconciling its theoretical principles and ethical and legal constraints, on the one hand, with the practical realities of war—including the destruction and human suffering they cause—on the other. The fundamental question that runs throughout the study therefore remains: Is the just war truly just? In addition to this central question, several subsidiary questions are posed and examined throughout the dissertation. Can justice genuinely be achieved through means that inherently involve violence and destruction, or is the concept of just war merely a theoretical construct that collapses when confronted with practical reality? To what extent can Just War Theory function as a comprehensive and realistic framework capable of linking theory and practice while meeting the demands of justice, ethics, and law? What humanitarian, social, and legal challenges emerge at each stage of war, particularly with regard to the protection of civilians and the safeguarding of human rights for the most vulnerable groups, such as women and children? Finally, can there truly be a just war, or is justice in war merely an illusion shaped by political necessity and strategic interest?

The research proceeds from a central hypothesis that underpins its entire analytical and critical structure: while Just War Theory constitutes a significant and historically important attempt to impose moral and legal constraints on the use of armed force, and while it has contributed meaningfully to the development of international humanitarian law and the ethical regulation of military conduct, it remains inherently and structurally limited in its practical application. A war may satisfy the conditions of political or legal justice—just cause, legitimate authority, right intention, and a declared moral objective—while remaining profoundly unjust at the human, psychological, and social levels. The lived experience of those upon whom war is imposed cannot be reconciled with the theoretical language of just cause and proportionality. A war fought for a just cause is still brutal, and no ethical framework can explain to a frightened child, a violated woman, or an innocent civilian reduced to rubble and grief that what they have endured bears any meaningful relation to justice. In this sense, the concept of just war functions as an ethical ideal that frequently collides with the harsh realities of armed conflict.

The study aims to achieve a number of interconnected objectives that together constitute its overarching analytical and critical purpose. These include analyzing the philosophical and legal roots of Just War Theory; discussing the ethical, legal, and humanitarian principles upon which the theory is based at each of the three stages of war—before its initiation, during its conduct, and in its aftermath; evaluating the lived realities of people and societies that have experienced armed conflict or any use of armed force, with particular attention to the most vulnerable groups; and documenting the negative consequences of wars, including physical destruction, loss of life, forced displacement, psychological devastation, and the profound social and moral disintegration that armed conflict leaves in its wake. These objectives collectively seek to contribute to both academic and humanitarian debates by highlighting the ethical and humanitarian challenges associated with applying Just War Theory in practice and by shedding light on the severe humanitarian conditions produced by war in general, whether it is deemed just or unjust by those who wage it.

The significance of this topic is rooted in its profoundly interdisciplinary nature, as it brings together philosophy, ethics, law, politics, and the human and social sciences within a single analytical framework. This study contributes to enriching the philosophical debate on the relationship between ethics and politics by linking what is (politics), with what ought to be (ethics). In doing so, it helps to broaden the scope of research on the intersection between ethics and politics at a time when wars and armed conflicts are increasingly prevalent and increasingly destructive. The study holds academic and philosophical significance insofar as it enriches philosophical and ethical research on the nature of armed conflicts and the relationship between just war, human values, and legal principles. It holds legal and political significance in that it sheds light on how international laws governing armed conflicts—such as the Geneva Conventions and international human rights law—are formulated and applied, and on the responsibilities of states and other actors in armed conflicts. It holds humanitarian and social significance in that it highlights the catastrophic consequences of war for innocent populations, particularly civilians, women, and children. It holds critical significance in that it exposes the gap between theory and practice by presenting a realistic study of the humanitarian situation produced by war, ultimately revealing that war itself often constitutes a profound violation of the very human values. Finally, it holds ethical significance in that it raises fundamental questions regarding the

responsibility of individuals, states, and the international community in limiting injustice during armed conflicts.

Given the complex and interdisciplinary nature of the topic, the study adopts an integrated methodological approach that combines the analytical-synthetic, comparative, descriptive, historical, and critical methods. This methodological combination is employed to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the multiple dimensions of the subject and to ensure that the research engages meaningfully with both its theoretical and its practical dimensions. The analytical-synthetic method serves as the foundational tool for analyzing the concept of just war and the fundamental principles upon which Just War Theory is based, and subsequently for synthesizing these elements within a unified intellectual framework that connects the ethical, legal, and humanitarian dimensions of the theory. Building upon this foundation, the historical method is employed to trace the development of the idea of just war, beginning with its philosophical roots and extending to its political and legal formulations, with the aim of revealing the evolution of the concept and its continuity in human thought. Alongside this historical method, the comparative method is utilized to distinguish between just wars and unjust wars through an analysis of the defining characteristics of each, and it is further applied in the discussion of the principles of just war —particularly controversial principles such as the principle of distinction between legitimate and illegitimate targets— by presenting differing viewpoints and systematically comparing them. The descriptive method is employed to portray phenomena associated with wars and their humanitarian, social, and psychological effects, particularly the suffering of those who have experienced armed conflict, thereby providing a realistic account of the consequences of war. Finally, the critical method accompanies the research throughout its entirety, subjecting concepts and principles to sustained critical analysis and exposing the contradictions between declared ethical principles and actual wartime practices, as well as the gap between the ethical theoretical framework of Just War Theory and the painful, unethical, and inhumane realities of armed conflict.

The dissertation is organized into six main chapters, each of which addresses a distinct but interconnected dimension of the central research question. Chapter One: *“What Is the Just War?”*. This chapter provides the conceptual foundation for the subsequent chapters. It begins by reviewing the definition of the term and the conceptual dimensions associated with it, and then clarifies the relationship between just war, on the one hand, and ethics, on the other, arguing that Just War Theory is an

ethical theory of political conflict that seeks to combine ethical idealism with political realism. It attempts to frame decisions related to war within clear ethical boundaries, striving to reconcile the moral principles governing the conduct of war with the practical realities of political and military decision-making. It seeks to manage the decision-making processes of war within distinct moral parameters to align ethical limits with the operational constraints of managing warfare and the politics that influence and are in turn affected by it.

We then move on to tracing the historical roots of just war thinking at both the philosophical and legal levels: At the philosophical level, the chapter traces the contributions of key thinkers who shaped the tradition. Thinkers such as Cicero, Augustine, and Aquinas progressively constructed the foundational criteria of the tradition—including just cause, legitimate authority, and right intention—each contributing distinct dimensions to the understanding of when and how war may be ethically permissible. The chapter further examines the social contract theories of Hobbes and Rousseau as complementary solutions proposed by modern political philosophy to regulate violence and organize collective life at both the individual and international levels. At the legal level, the chapter examines how just war principles were progressively translated into binding international norms through a series of landmark instruments—including the Hague Conventions, the Nuremberg Trials, the United Nations Charter, and the Geneva Conventions—each of which contributed to codifying the ethical regulation of armed conflict and affirming the accountability of states and individuals for violations of international humanitarian law.

Chapter Two: “*The Just War as a Theory*” extends the analysis by discussing the objectives associated with Just War Theory and classifying them according to their nature and purpose. With regard to objectives, the chapter identifies three interconnected categories. At the ethical level, Just War Theory seeks to establish a necessary moral standard for determining whether a proposed military action is just or unjust. The theory also rejects unrestrained violence even when war is deemed just, insisting on stricter restrictions on the means that may be employed. At the humanitarian and social level, the theory strives to protect peoples from the ravages of armed conflict by imposing ethical and humanitarian constraints that prevent states, groups, and individuals from resorting to force for unjust reasons such as aggression, while obliging them to use it only for justified reasons such as standing against genocide. In this sense, the theory reflects a humanitarian perspective that transcends

narrow interests and focuses on humanity as a whole, seeking to transform war from a conflict driven by self-interest into a means of protecting innocent lives, minimizing humanitarian harm, and preventing chaos and grave violations of human rights. At the critical level, Just War Theory functions as a framework that continually analyzes and questions the reasons and methods behind the use of armed force. The theory thus acknowledges the reality of violence in international politics while seeking to reduce its incidence and steer its manifestation toward more humane norms and values.

The chapter then examines the distinction between just and unjust wars. Unjust wars are characterized primarily by aggression —wars initiated without legitimate cause, in violation of moral values and international law, constituting an assault not merely against a particular people but against the foundations of global peace as a whole. Just wars, by contrast, include defensive wars and legitimate resistance against aggression, in which states or peoples exercise their inherent right to defend themselves against unlawful attack. The chapter further examines humanitarian intervention as an additional example of a just war —cases in which the use of armed force is directed not toward the defense of narrow national interests but toward the protection of populations facing grave humanitarian catastrophes, thereby reflecting the theory's broader commitment to the protection of human dignity and the prevention of mass atrocities.

Chapters Three, Four, and Five are fundamentally interconnected and together constitute the most comprehensive theoretical framework of Just War Theory. Each of these chapters corresponds to a specific phase of war and includes the principles associated with that phase. These chapters are as follows:

Chapter Three: “*The Principles of Justice in Initiating War*” addresses the pre-war phase —commonly referred to in the tradition as *Jus ad Bellum*— and focuses on the principles that must be satisfied before a decision to resort to war can be considered ethically and legally justified. These principles include just cause, which requires that war be waged only in response to a genuine wrong or threat; legitimate authority, which requires that the decision to wage war be taken by a recognized and accountable authority; right intention, which requires that the parties going to war be genuinely motivated by the pursuit of justice rather than by revenge, greed, or political gain; probability of success, which requires that there be a reasonable prospect that the war will achieve its stated objectives; last resort, which requires that all non-violent alternatives have been exhausted before recourse to armed force; and proportionality, which requires that the expected benefits of the war outweigh the expected harms. The

chapter analyzes each of these principles in depth, as they will determine whether the decision to go to war is just or unjust.

Chapter Four: “*The Principles of Justice in the Conduct of War*” addresses the ethical principles that must be observed during the conduct of war —the phase known in the tradition as *Jus in Bello*— and examines several principles that are both foundational and deeply contested. The chapter begins with the principle of the moral equality of combatants, which holds that all soldiers who comply with the laws of war are entitled to equal moral and legal status, regardless of the justice or injustice of the cause for which they fight. This principle is one of the most contentious principles, as it has been subject to significant criticism, most notably that soldiers defending a just cause can in no way be equated with those fighting for an unjust cause or for aggression. The chapter then examines one of the most important principles of *Jus in Bello* — the principle of distinction — which requires that combatants at all times distinguish between legitimate military targets and protected civilians, and that they direct their attacks only against the former. The chapter also examines the principle of double effect, which addresses the moral permissibility of military actions that are intended to achieve a legitimate military objective but that foreseeably cause harm to civilians as a secondary effect, and the principle of necessity, which requires that military force be used only to the extent that is strictly necessary to achieve the legitimate objectives of the war.

Chapter Five: “*The Principles of Justice in the Aftermath of War*” highlights the principles related to the post-war phase —known as *Jus post Bellum*— and addresses the attempt to establish the foundations of justice after the end of armed conflict. The chapter argues that justice in war cannot be assessed solely on the basis of criteria applied before or during hostilities, but must also be evaluated in terms of what happens after the fighting ends. This dimension of justice manifests in several interconnected processes: settlement and reconciliation, which involve the negotiation of agreements that genuinely address the underlying causes of the conflict rather than merely suspending hostilities; reparations and compensation, which involve the acknowledgment of harm done and the provision of material and symbolic redress to victims; and accountability and punishment, which involve the prosecution of those responsible for war crimes and other violations of international humanitarian law. The chapter also examines the broader humanitarian and ethical principles associated with post-war justice, including the principle of forgiveness — a dimension of justice that is

often overlooked in legal and political frameworks but that is essential to genuine social reconstruction and to the achievement of a just and lasting peace. The chapter argues that post-war justice represents a critical test of the extent to which the parties to a conflict remain committed to the ethical principles they claimed to defend during the war, and that the mere cessation of fighting constitutes only a temporary pause that may lead to a return to conflict unless the underlying causes are genuinely addressed.

Chapter Six: “*The Humanitarian Impact of War and the Challenges of the Post-Conflict Phase*” shifts from the theoretical and normative framework to the practical and applied dimension of the research, examining the humanitarian impact of war on innocent civilians and the suffering they endure. The chapter is divided into three main sections. The first examines the general cost of war on innocent civilians, addressing both the direct physical consequences of armed conflict—including killing, injury, and the destruction of homes, infrastructure, and livelihoods—and the less visible but no less devastating consequences of forced displacement and migration. The chapter documents the experiences of civilians who are compelled to flee their homes in search of safety, often facing exploitation, fraud, and profound cultural and social dislocation in the places where they seek refuge. The second section focuses on the specific situation of women in armed conflict, examining both the general conditions they face and the particular forms of violence—including sexual violence and rape—to which they are subjected. The chapter argues that the word ‘female’ alone renders the cost, loss, and pain imposed on women during conflicts doubled and exceedingly brutal, and that certain acts committed against women—particularly rape—are regarded even by those who commit them as more devastating than killing, precisely because they are intended not only to harm individual victims but to humiliate entire communities and to plant seeds of pain intended to endure long after the formal end of hostilities. The third section examines the impact of armed conflict on children, addressing both the general consequences of war for child development and well-being and the specific phenomenon of child soldiers—children who are recruited, coerced, or manipulated into participating in armed conflict and who are thereby deprived of their childhood, their innocence, and their fundamental right to protection. The chapter argues that children represent perhaps the deepest tragedy of war, as they are transformed from symbols of innocence into victims—and sometimes tools—of conflict, and that the psychological and developmental consequences of exposure to armed conflict during childhood are profound, enduring, and in many cases irreversible.

The conclusions of the study bring together the findings of all six chapters and address the central question of the research directly and comprehensively. The study concludes that Just War Theory, despite its historical significance and its genuine contribution to the development of ethical and legal constraints on the use of armed force, remains inherently limited in its practical application. The theory seeks to regulate evil rather than to eliminate it, which makes it, in the words of the research, an inherently problematic and contentious ethical concept. A war may be just in law yet unjust in conscience; legitimate in political discourse yet devastating in human experience. Even when war fulfills the criteria of political or legal justice, it often remains profoundly distant from human and emotional justice, leaving behind psychological devastation that cannot be justified or repaired by agreements, verdicts, or legal rulings.

The study further concludes that civilians on all sides bear the greatest burden of any armed conflict — those who remain in conflict zones are exposed to the risk of death, injury, and loss, while those who flee face exploitation, cultural shock, and the traumatic experience of rebuilding their lives in unfamiliar environments. Women and children, as the most vulnerable groups, pay the highest price of war both physically and psychologically. The declaration of the end of war and the cessation of hostilities does not, in any sense, signify the end of human suffering. On the contrary, it may mark the beginning of a heightened and more painful awareness of loss and anguish, as individuals who were previously preoccupied with survival are confronted for the first time with the full weight of their psychological devastation.

The research also concludes that no reconciliation commission, no legal or international body, regardless of its degree of objectivity, can fully calculate the true cost of any war. Even if material and economic losses can be measured, psychological and human losses cannot. They consist of suppressed emotions and silenced screams; they are the losses reflected in the eyes of mothers who have lost their children; they appear in the broken spirit of innocent childhood and in the look of terror etched onto the face of an innocent civilian before death. None of this can be quantified or reduced to mere numbers recorded on reports or pages through which we attempt to assess the justice or injustice of a particular war.

Ultimately, the dissertation calls for a fundamental rethinking of the concept of justice itself — not only in relation to war, but in a world that continues to allow wars to be possible. It argues that there may be no just war in an absolute sense, but that there

is always a just peace worthy of pursuit — a peace grounded not in a balance of power, but in fairness to the human being and in the preservation of human dignity wherever it may be. The study affirms that calling for peace and rejecting violence are more important than merely regulating or legitimizing violence, and that the responsibility to cultivate reconciliation and uphold human dignity is a shared and collective obligation that transcends the boundaries of states, nations, and political systems.

The principal personal contributions of this research may be identified across several distinct but interconnected dimensions. At the theoretical level, the study offers an integrated critical framework that brings together the philosophical, legal, ethical, and human dimensions of Just War Theory within a single coherent analysis, rather than treating each dimension in isolation. This integrative approach enables the research to reveal connections and tensions between different aspects of the theory that might otherwise remain obscured, and to present a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of both the achievements and the limitations of just war thinking. At the conceptual level, the study makes a distinctive contribution by foregrounding a dimension of justice that is rarely addressed by Just War theorists —namely, justice at the human, psychological, and social levels— and by arguing that this dimension is not peripheral but indispensable to any comprehensive and honest evaluation of armed conflict. The research demonstrates that a theory of just war that confines itself to political, legal, and philosophical categories, without engaging seriously with the human realities of suffering, trauma, and loss, is a theory that speaks to the world of states and institutions rather than to the world of human beings. At the methodological level, the use of an integrated approach combining analytical, comparative, historical, descriptive, and critical methods enables the research to engage with its subject matter from multiple perspectives simultaneously, producing a richer and more textured understanding than any single method could provide. At the practical level, the study makes a concrete proposal that Just War Theory should incorporate, within its post-war principles, a specific set of rules addressing women and children — not only because they are the most vulnerable groups, but because the reconstruction of any society must begin with the protection and empowerment of those who bear the greatest responsibility for shaping future generations. At the ethical level, the study contributes to the ongoing debate about the relationship between ethics and politics by arguing that the gap between just war as an ethical ideal and war as a lived human experience is not merely academic but morally urgent, and that any ethical framework that fails to take this gap

seriously risks becoming an instrument of rationalization rather than a genuine tool of moral accountability. Finally, it may constitute a contribution that bridges the gap between academic inquiry and human testimony, and that serves as a reminder that the questions raised by this research are not abstract philosophical puzzles but matters of life, suffering, and the enduring human desire for justice and dignity.

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