Attitudes Towards Armed Conflicts: An Ethical Reflection on War

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ABSTRACT: Armed conflicts are one of the greatest challenges facing contemporary society. Despite attempts to avoid wars, history and current reality show us that this is not very easy to achieve. Due to their conflictual nature, humans are the ones who cause various conflicts which, if not resolved diplomatically, can escalate and cause significant damage. The biggest problem with war is that it leads to the loss of human lives, which is totally wrong if we consider that life is sacred. There are three attitudes that a person can develop towards armed conflicts: activism, pacifism, and the theory of just war. Activism argues that a military conflict generated by the state leadership must be supported regardless of the reasons and causes invoked. Pacifism argues that no conflict can be justified. Between these two diametrically opposed perspectives lies the theory of just war, which, although it advocates for peace, argues that in certain cases, some wars can be justified. All three approaches raise questions when analyzed from an ethical point of view, taking as their starting point the sanctity of life, which must be protected by all possible means.

KEYWORDS: armed conflict, war, ethics, activism, pacifism, just war theory

1. Introduction

This article will analyze three possible attitudes toward war. The first attitude is activism, which manifests itself in a person's desire to participate in war and their motivation to fight, considering war as a means of achieving justice. The second attitude is pacifism, which manifests itself when a person considers war to be completely wrong and therefore no war can be justified, so participation in war should be discouraged by all possible means. The third attitude is the theory of just war, in which conflicts are carefully analyzed and, if there is a just cause, then military conflict is considered good.

This topic is of interest because human history shows us that wars have been a defining feature of human society. Over the years, regardless of causes and circumstances, armed conflicts have been present. Even though most wars ended with peace treaties, a general global peace was not possible because at least one of the parties that committed to respecting the treaties was the one that violated the established provisions. The effects of wars are negative, they have long-term consequences, and this leads us to carefully consider whether a war can be justified or not. Even today, when we talk about a modern society and global organizations that advocate for peace, we see that there are military conflicts that lead to loss of life and have negative effects on society.

From a methodological point of view, we will define what a military conflict is and its effects on people. Moral arguments will be brought up to demonstrate that life is sacred and must be respected regardless of the reasons that may be invoked to justify wars. Then, the three possible attitudes towards war will be analyzed: activism, pacifism, and the theory of just war. For each attitude, the arguments used by the followers and promoters of the concept will be presented and the effects of each perspective will be analyzed. Finally, an ethical analysis of the three possible attitudes will be made, highlighting the fact that war must be avoided by all possible means, because its effects are tragic and violate the sanctity of life.

2. Armed conflicts

By armed conflicts we mean those situations of conflict between two states or two opposing groups that use weapons and other tools to achieve certain political, financial, ethnic, or territorial interests, or to satisfy a desire for revenge. Although the causes may be multiple, wars have been present in society since ancient times, with some states and empires making war an end in itself. Therefore, the issue of war is one of interest because the threats of war and existing conflicts today show us that there is a permanent danger (Măcelaru, 2025, pp. 865-866). All responsible decision-makers should carefully consider certain developments, especially in areas known to be prone to military conflict.

Wars are actions based on certain laws. Some of these laws are subjective in nature, while others are objective. We must begin our analysis with the idea that war encompasses several determining factors and is a socio-political phenomenon. In general, it has to do with the laws of society and the laws of politics (Văduva, 2003, p. 4). Although there are laws and methodologies aimed at regulating the conditions of war, we observe major problems with regard to war decisions, because there is no general rule that applies to all wars and is unanimously accepted globally. For example, McMahan (2006, p. 414) believes that "the position of decision-makers on issues related to war and peace, as well as the arguments of intellectuals who have a great influence on the decision-making

process, are usually based on a set of largely amoral assumptions." When it comes to the morality of decisions regarding participation in war, discussions are quite difficult to conduct because each party involved in the conflict claims that what it is doing is good and necessary.

Although ethics should play an important role in decisions determining whether a war is necessary and represents the only possible option, this does not happen because, in most cases, other interests take precedence over ethical considerations. With regard to certain ethical considerations, in most cases a biased approach is taken. "If ethical considerations do arise, they are presented in a simplified and crude form that serves to manipulate public opinion, which, interestingly, tends to reject the amorality of the decision-making elites" (McMahan, 2006, p. 414). Surrounding the real reasons that lead to certain armed conflicts, there are hidden interests and, at the same time, an attempt to manipulate public opinion regarding the legitimacy of the conflict.

When we observe the effects of war, we realize that armed conflicts invariably entail the loss of human lives. This realization must compel us to engage in serious reflection on whether there are genuine grounds to promote and support an armed conflict. It is necessary to analyze the issue from an ethical perspective and to consider "whether, from a moral point of view, the question of the legitimacy of a war that results in the loss of human lives arises" (Botoi, 2024, p. 357). Life must be regarded as sacred, and the integrity of life must be protected at all costs. It is imperative that all individuals receive equal treatment, without distinction between different categories of persons (Măcelaru, 2014, pp. 75-78). Every individual, irrespective of nationality, social status, or other characteristics, must be treated fairly, and considered equal to all other persons in matters concerning the right to life (Măcelaru, 2023, pp. 621-624). "The right to life is a right inherent to all persons" (McCloskey, 1995, p. 68), and "its foundation lies—and must be found—in human nature, in the autonomy of the human being" (McCloskey, 1995, p. 68). This right to life should not be understood merely as the right not to be killed; rather, it represents far more, signifying the guarantee of receiving support and assistance in safeguarding and preserving one's own life against potential threats, regardless of their origin (McCloskey, 1995, p. 68).

Although there are rules of war, in many cases they are not fully enforced. By these rules, we mean rules of conduct that must be observed by all those participating in war. The purpose of these regulations is to achieve "the protection of the right to life" (Botoi, 2024, p. 357). Without compliance with the rules, wars, regardless of their motivation, necessity, or urgency, turn into real catastrophes that affect humanity and can have long-term negative effects.

In addition to the loss of human lives, war causes financial problems, affecting human well-being. War involves high costs and its financing is detrimental to other areas of utmost importance such as health, education, and infrastructure. Recent history shows us that wars have led to economic

contractions, with participating countries experiencing a decline in living standards and economic recession affecting all strategic activities, causing discontent and hardship among the populations of the belligerent countries.

There are several types of armed conflicts, and wars can be classified according to various criteria. In general, there are the following types of military conflicts: total war, partial war, civil war, and guerrilla warfare (Rogers & Thomas, 2010, pp. 2-3). Regardless of how they unfold, all of the above categories produce undesirable effects. The reasons that lead to armed conflicts are diverse. According to the classification made by Rogers and Thomas (2010, pp. 4-5), there are four main causes that lead to the outbreak of armed conflicts:

- Economic cause: war occurs because certain natural resources are desired by another state, which decides to invade the state that possesses those resources.
- Social cause: war occurs due to differences that arise in various social groups. These differences may be caused by religion, ethnicity, various traditions, or unresolved conflicts from the past.
- Political cause: the leaders of a state or group are the ones who provoke a conflict against other political leaders due to differences in political opinion.
- Ideological cause: ideological differences between various groups can lead to wars in order to impose supremacy. For example, different philosophical and conceptual opinions can spark conflicts between supporters of various schools of thought.

War must also be viewed through the lens of the fact that "the world is conflictual" (Degeratu, Tudose & Văduva, 2012, p. 14). This general conflict stems from the fact that "human nature is conflictual, because our living environment is conflictual, because everything around us is conflictual" (Degeratu & Tudose & Văduva, 2012, p. 14). In these circumstances, it is very important to understand that the main cause of conflict lies within human beings. If each individual lives in conflict, the union of several individuals will generate a greater scope of conflict. For this reason, no matter how many arguments are brought to justify war, the causes must first be sought within man. War "is only a form of conflict and not conflict itself. Conflict does not necessarily mean war" (Degeratu, Tudose & Văduva, 2012, p. 16). As a result of identifying humans as the main cause of conflict, we also understand that conflict resolution depends on how humans treat and relate to their state of internal conflict.

Despite the conflict that humans have within themselves, "war is not and never has been to the liking of humans, even though humans are often defined as warlike beings, the only warlike beings known to date" (Degeratu, Tudose & Văduva, 2012, p. 18). With this in mind, decision-makers need to seriously reflect on the causes of war and advocate for a resolution of internal conflict, bearing in mind that escalating external conflict will not solve the problem but rather amplify it.

3. Activism

Activism is the belief that a person has a duty to go and fight in any war if the government or leader of the group asks them to. This idea is widespread among military groups that have volunteer followers who want to fight for state causes, considering that any fight for the homeland and nation is good, legitimate, and right. The position taken by military activism has to do with the concept of obedience to the government and the motto that one should respond to requests to participate in war regardless of the circumstances.

This approach finds support in the fact that the individual must be subject to the ruling power and finds explanations in philosophy and certain ethical models. "One of the strongest arguments in support of this position is taken from Plato's dialogue, *Crito*. Here, he gives three explicit reasons (and two more that are implied) why a person should not reject even a government that unjustly condemns him to death" (Geisler, 2008, p. 250). Plato's arguments are described by Geisler (2008, pp. 251-253) and refer to the following aspects:

- "The government is the parent of man" – this assertion is substantiated by the fact that when a person is born and enters this world, they are received by a state that ensures the initial recognition of their rights. The state facilitates their existence and provides the necessary protection during the period when they are young and vulnerable. As a form of reciprocation, when the individual reaches adulthood and is summoned by the state's leadership, they are obligated to intervene and promptly respond to the call to arms in times of war.

- "The government is the educator of man" – this assertion is substantiated by the fact that an individual's education and all that they become are, to a significant extent, due to the government's involvement in their education. A person becomes an educated and cultured individual, rather than a barbarian, because they have been raised within a particular cultural framework (Rotaru, 2021, pp. 87-92). The government is the entity that ensures a normal and conducive environment for the cultivation of education through learning systems and facilities provided to those seeking instruction. Given these considerations, a person who has received an education and benefited from educational opportunities is, therefore, morally obliged to respond to the government's call to arms in times of war.

- "Governed individuals have the duty to obey the government" – this assertion is supported by the idea that a person residing within a country has entered into an implicit agreement with the government, whereby they have undertaken the obligation to obey its authority. Even if such an agreement is not necessarily explicit, by the mere fact of existing within a state, there is a tacit acceptance on the part of the citizen to adhere to the

authority of the government. If a citizen receives protection, the right to education, and healthcare, then why should they refuse a request to participate in war? An individual cannot unilaterally decide what to accept from the state and what to reject. If one benefits from certain services that are personally advantageous, one must also accept those obligations that are necessary and indispensable to the state.

- "The governed individual is free to leave their government" – this assertion is justified by the notion that a person ought to be free to decide the place in which they wish to live. If they choose to remain within a particular state and benefit from its advantages, that individual is consequently obliged to assist the state when it is in need. No one should be compelled to remain in a specific place; however, if one accepts to reside somewhere, they must exhibit loyalty to that place. The decision to emigrate to another country in the context of a call to arms effectively constitutes an evasion of one's responsibilities.

- "Without governance, there would be chaos" – this statement is substantiated by the fact that the absence of laws signifies complete disorder. No matter how flawed a particular law might be, the total absence of any legal framework would mean that each individual acts according to their own will, a situation that would inevitably degenerate into anarchy. Any form of governance, including that which is considered unjust, is preferable to the absence of governance altogether. Thus, we must regard the governance of a state as a necessary element, and even though certain decisions may be disagreeable to us because they affect our interests, they are nonetheless preferable to the absence of any decision whatsoever.

Proponents of military activism believe that regardless of the situation, if the leadership of a state calls for conscription into the army, this must be done without question. Certain ethical criteria that analyze whether a war is necessary, good, and just should not be brought into the discussion; only unconditional obedience is required. McMahan (2006, p. 414) analyzes this type of approach and finds that supporters of military activism believe that "moral norms do not apply to foreign policy, which should be guided exclusively by concern for the national interest". Although in theory it is state leaders who officially declare that they pursue only the good and promise to make ethical decisions, we often find that "national policies seem to be based on extremely cautious reasoning" (McMahan, 2006, p. 415), and we should not be surprised that "discussions of the ethics of war and nuclear deterrence usually support positions and policies quite different from the actual practices of states" (McMahan, 2006, p. 415).

4. Pacifism

Pacifism promotes and maintains that a person should never participate in war regardless of its causes. In other words, pacifism argues that all fighting is wrong and should not take place. For supporters of this view, the basic idea is that "killing is always wrong" (Geisler, 2008, p. 254; Rotaru, 2015, pp. 318-322), and this idea can be developed by considering that "at the heart of pacifism lies the belief that the deliberate suppression of human life is always wrong. The intentional taking of someone's life, especially in the context of war, is radically wrong" (Geisler, 2008, p. 254). There are many arguments against war when we look at military conflicts through the lens of pacifism. From the perspective of those who promote a world without conflict, "no war, regardless of its nature, can suppress the right to life of the human person" (Botoi, 2024, p. 365). Global peace is desirable, and military conflicts must be avoided at all costs. This approach promotes the idea that "every human being's right to life must be protected and guaranteed by the legitimate authority of all states in the world" (Botoi, 2024, p. 364).

The right to life is considered sacred by pacifists, who believe that there is no reason to kill anyone. This idea is shared by most movements that promote the sanctity of life, but discussions about war are more complex due to their multiple implications. "Even if the majority of the public's perception of the inalienability of the right to life is favorable in most situations, when we bring up the topic of war and the presumption of violent loss of human life, many clarifications are needed" (Botoi, 2024, p. 365). These clarifications must be made carefully and taking into account all existing arguments.

Violence in the world is a bad thing, and most of the time, the effects of violence are negative (Imbusch, 2003, pp. 13-39). Violence that happens during war is way more intense than other types of violence (Măcelaru, 2025, pp. 872-873). "War, through its military dimension, is the most widespread and terrible form of violence" (Frunzeti & Mureșan & Văduva, 2009, p. 10). In these circumstances, pacifism advocates the avoidance of all war, which, if achieved, would lead to the elimination of the most widespread form of violence possible.

The effects of war cannot be fully known or anticipated. Even if there are well-thought-out tactics and calculations before wars are waged, their true effects and complete understanding cannot be anticipated, only speculated upon (Stein & Russett, 1980, pp. 399-422). This is a key issue because any support for war carries major risks that are often unknown. No war can be fully anticipated in terms of its medium- and long-term effects. "War itself, as a violent human action, is a rigorous, meticulous, planned, and highly organized activity. But as a complex, long-lasting, and large-scale social phenomenon, war can have unpredictable and chaotic developments and outcomes, with effects that are difficult to anticipate" (Frunzeti, Mureșan & Văduva, 2009, p. 415). Considering the impossibility of

anticipation, pacifists talk about the immense risks of war and argue that ignorance of the risks is a good reason to avoid war.

From today's perspective, we can see that war has taken on new forms and different modes of conduct. We are currently witnessing increasingly unusual forms of warfare. The problem with these changes is that they bring uncertainty and increase the risk of danger. Changes in society, increasingly tense relations between people, and recent developments in the military "induce new uncertainties in the nature of conflict, pushing war and armed conflict toward nonlinear, chaotic, and unpredictable developments" (Frunzeti & Mureșan & Văduva, 2009, pp. 414-415). Any attempt at predictability, damage assessment, and duration anticipation has become almost impossible to estimate. Considering these things to be unknown, pacifism advocates avoiding any armed conflict on the grounds that even good causes can lead to effects far more damaging than the reasons that triggered the military conflict.

Although, from a theoretical point of view, pacifism refers to the total absence of war and the rejection of any military conflict, in practice, "pacifism is a difficult position to sustain" (McMahan, 2006, p. 416). History and reality show us that many desires and ideals, which seem very good in theory, are extremely difficult, or almost impossible, to put into practice. Due to absolutist approaches, pacifists "believe that war is never justified" (McMahan, 2006, p. 416) and at the same time that "no moral justification for war can ever be found" (McMahan, 2006, p. 416). Unfortunately, although these statements have moral support, in reality it is extremely difficult to find a practical basis for general peace, especially when a person or a state becomes a victim of an aggressor.

5. The theory of just war

In addition to the two major currents expressed above (activism and pacifism), there is a third approach that should be viewed as a middle ground. McMahan (2006, p. 416) argues that "over the centuries, a paradigm has developed in the ethics of war that attempts to argue for a middle ground between realism [activism] and pacifism". The new approach attempts to mediate between the first two perspectives. "The resulting position—also known as the theory of just war—offers arguments for the use of violence in war that do not contradict either the common-sense justifications for the use of violence by individuals or the justifications for the use of violence by states in the internal defense of rights" (McMahan, 2006, p. 416).

The arguments put forward by this theory are that certain situations require the use of weapons for purposes such as protecting life, and that this could limit the negative effects. "Just as violence used by police forces can be legitimate provided that it serves just and well-defined purposes, so too can the use of

violence by the state against external threats be legitimate if the purposes are just and the means are subject to limitations" (McMahan, 2006, p. 416).

The theory of just war has undergone some changes over time (Costinescu, 2012, pp. 178-186). These developments show us that society has been constantly concerned with finding solutions to war, but also with rejecting any form of aggression as far as possible. This theory is not just an intellectual idea from the academic world, but must be analyzed from the perspective of its evolution over time and historical truth, which reveals valuable information that must be taken into account when discussing just war. "The development of the theory over time cannot be understood without reference to the general context of developments in the social, military and political world. The theory of just war is not a purely intellectual construct isolated from the material-historical world" (Costinescu, 2012, pp. 178-186). Considering these things, this theory must be viewed from a historical perspective and adapted to current needs, taking into account the evolution of society and the changes taking place on a global scale.

The global needs in the fight against terrorism (Szallós-Farkas, 2013, p. 137) have generated numerous voices asserting that there are noble causes that must be fought for. "The war against terrorism has transformed pacifism—in the minds of many—into a naïve and unrealistic concept after September 11, 2001" (Szallós-Farkas, 2013, p. 137). The argument is that terrorism itself threatens human life, impacting innocent people. Proponents of the just war theory argue that if there are solutions to limit and eliminate terrorism, these solutions must be applied; this leads adherents and advocates of the just war theory to consider the use of arms fully justified in such cases.

In order to properly discuss a just war, a thorough analysis of all relevant factors is required. A war can easily be misinterpreted and deemed just if all its aspects are not carefully considered. Some supporters of the just war theory have formulated several principles that must be taken into account when conducting a preliminary analysis of a conflict to determine whether it is appropriate and can be considered a just war. According to Beauchamp (1975, pp. 173-174), the principles that define a just war are as follows: the enemy must be an aggressor that forces one or more nations into a position of self-defense; the objectives of the war must be inherently good, including the objective of achieving peace; the war must be declared by a legally constituted authority; all reasonable means of peaceful negotiation must be exhausted before the declaration of war; the damage inflicted upon the enemy must not intentionally exceed what is necessary to win the war; the conduct of war must not violate recognized rules of warfare; and any attack must be carried out with the utmost care to avoid killing innocent and defenseless persons. All of these conditions are essential and must be strictly observed. "The first four conditions are intended to morally justify the decision to enter into war, while the last three are intended to morally justify the strategic means employed once the war has begun" (Beauchamp, 1975, p. 173).

The theory of just war derives naturally from the other two perspectives on war: activism and pacifism (Geisler, 2008, p. 268), both of which have already been discussed in this study. We need to understand that the world we live in is not a perfect world, so evil implicitly exists. This evil tends to develop and affect others as well. "In an evil world, force will always be justified to reduce the number of evil people. Ideally, killings by the police would not be necessary, but this is not an ideal world—it is an evil world" (Geisler, 2008, p. 268). In this context, we should consider that "it is wrong not to resist evil; it is morally wrong not to defend the innocent. Sometimes only physical force and taking someone's life can achieve this goal. Too often in this violent world, hostages are taken and all offers of negotiation fail. Sometimes the intervention of the armed forces is the only way to save these innocent lives" (Geisler, 2008, p. 268).

6. Ethical analysis of the three perspectives

The biggest problem with war is that it endangers human beings, leading to the loss of human lives. From a moral point of view, life is precious and there is no legitimate reason for suppressing life, regardless of how many reasons and arguments may be brought up (McCloskey, 1995, pp. 68-71). Personal ethics promote love, peace, respect, and peaceful coexistence in the community (Botoi, 2024, p. 365). From a moral standpoint, there are no arguments for war, regardless of the circumstances. All decision-makers should consider armed conflicts to be a bad thing. Given that current reality shows us that sometimes diplomatic means of avoiding conflict are not enough, we will formulate an ethical opinion on each attitude analyzed in this study.

The first attitude has to do with activism, and the followers of this model are those who promote war, considering that every individual must be subject to state power (McMahan, 2006, pp. 414–415). If the government asks citizens to enlist in the army, no matter the circumstances or other details, every person is obliged to go to war (Geisler, 2008, pp. 247-254). The problem with activism is that not all states involved in war have noble motives and causes that led to the outbreak of the conflict, and in these circumstances, the activist as a participant in the conflict is the one who may end up supporting the wrong cause. Unconditional support for a state's decision-makers is ethically wrong, because any government must be accountable and answerable to other bodies for the decisions it makes.

The second attitude analyzed is pacifism. Proponents of this way of thinking argue that no war can be justified (Beauchamp, 1975, pp. 174-175). They promote general peace and say that no one should ever participate in war (McMahan, 2006, p. 416). Although this attitude is good in principle, it has a problem with resolving situations when one state becomes an aggressor towards another. If not all people embrace the values of pacifism, it remains more of an illusion and a theory. In practice, it is enough for one state to become an aggressor and it becomes very hard

and difficult to convince those who are victims not to defend themselves. It is true that universal peace is a goal and we should all strive for it, but if this is not yet achievable in practice, it is ethically complicated to apply pacifism in all conflict situations.

The just war theory represents the third perspective on war. Proponents of this perspective maintain that wars can be classified into two categories: just and unjust. By a just war, we understand that struggle which is undertaken for the purpose of defense and directed against an aggressor. The primary challenge inherent in this approach lies in the objective classification of wars (Geisler, 2008, p. 273). Unfortunately, in practice, each belligerent party claims to be fighting for a just cause. History demonstrates that, regrettably, not all those who have asserted a just cause have actually been justified. Given this reality, a mechanism has been proposed which encompasses several principles and criteria to verify whether a war is indeed just. According to this mechanism, it is suggested that, prior to the commencement of any war, diplomatic instruments should be fully utilized and that recourse to arms should be considered only in extreme circumstances (Beauchamp, 1975, pp. 172-174). From an ethical standpoint, this theory must be applied with caution and utmost care, with the aim of resolving conflicts only when diplomatic means have been exhausted and with the supreme objective of protecting life and minimizing harm.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis carried out in this study reveals that wars are intrinsic to humanity and are closely tied to human nature, which generally gravitates towards conflict. Numerous historical examples demonstrate that peace is of paramount importance and must be actively promoted and sustained by all decision-makers. Generally, wars do not bring about positive outcomes; their effects are devastating and long-lasting. The most acute problem posed by wars is that they jeopardize human life itself, which inevitably casts conflicts in a negative light, regardless of their intended purposes. Broadly speaking, there are three main attitudes that people adopt towards war. It is desirable that wars be avoided as much as possible and that weapons should be employed only as a last resort, with the sole purpose of protecting and defending the integrity of human life.

Activism must be rejected, as there are insufficient arguments to support its acceptance. Pacifism is desirable and ought to be promoted; however (Rotaru, 2023, pp. 825-874), it unfortunately remains more of a theoretical model than a practical one, since history has shown us that every period of humanity has been marked by armed conflicts. The theory of just war represents a middle ground perspective, seeking to harmonize the other two extreme models. It is exceedingly difficult to demonstrate that a war is just, and we must be extremely rigorous when declaring that a given war is fought for a just cause. In the face of the threat to

human life, a defensive war should primarily be waged through diplomatic means, in the hope of resolving the conflict peacefully.

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