How is War Justified?

It seems like war has existed since the beginning of time. From ancient battles to the World Wars of the 20th century, to the present, war has been a central component of the human experience. Throughout time, war has been justified as necessary for achieving justice or peace.

Many wars are justified on the grounds that they will bring justice to an unjust situation or peace to a violent situation. What is justice? What is peace? Peace is easiest to define dialectically as the opposite of war or violence. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Aristotle defines justice as “a principle for assigning distributable goods of various kinds to individual people, and a remedial principle that applies when one person wrongly interferes with another’s legitimate holdings.” John Rawls famously described justice as “the first virtue of social institutions” at one extreme. Some conceptions interpret justice as wholly concerned with what individuals can claim under existing laws and social conventions.

Justice has sometimes been understood in a way that makes it virtually indistinguishable from rightness in general. Aristotle, for example, distinguished between ‘universal’ justice that corresponded to ‘virtue as a whole’ and ‘particular’ justice which had a narrower scope. The wide sense may have been more evident in classical Greek than in modern English. But Aristotle also noted that when justice was identified with ‘complete virtue,’ this was always ‘in relation to another person.’ In other words, if justice is to be identified with morality as such, it must be moral in the sense of ‘what we owe to each other.’ But it is questionable whether justice should be understood so widely. At the level of individual ethics, justice is often contrasted with charity on the one hand, and mercy on the other, and these too are other-regarding virtues. At the level of public policy, reasons of justice are distinct from, and often compete with, reasons of other kinds, for example economic efficiency or environmental value.

Now war is fought over public policy. Economic efficiency is the main reason for war today. Is this enough to justify war? Pacifists would disagree. Pacifism is a commitment to peace and opposition to war. What is war? War is usually thought of as violence between states or, more broadly speaking, political communities. But the term “war” can also be applied to violent conflicts among individuals, as in Thomas Hobbes’ idea that the state of nature is a state of war. Pacifists tend to think that most intentionally caused harms are unjustifiable. But the goal of nonviolence might be extended to include the aim of controlling rough and intense emotions. In his essay, “Journey to Nonviolence,” for example, Martin Luther King Jr. claimed that a commitment to nonviolence required overcoming the “internal violence” of hatred and anger by cultivating love and compassion. Similarly, although peace is usually thought of as a political condition of amicable relations between states, terms like “peace” or “peaceful” can also be used to describe a relation between individuals or even a person’s state of mind. How war, peace, and justice are perceived has changed in the past centuries. Only time will tell how the situation in Ukraine will affect people’s perception of war, peace, and justice.

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