

# Notes on Pacifism

*Short presentation*

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**War** is an actual, intentional and widespread armed conflict between political communities. With respect to the morality of war there are three basic ways of reasoning: **just war theory**, **pacifism** and **realism**.

**Just war theory** is usually contrasted with **pacifism**: whereas the just war theorists agree that in some circumstances it is *not* morally wrong for a political community to carry out the war, pacifists hold that it *always is*. **Realism** disagrees with both: it argues that it is rather misleading to apply moral concepts such as “justice” to state behavior, on the international level.

## Objections to pacifism

1.

Pacifism is a selfish “clean hands” policy of people who do not want to share the burden of defense of their fellows.

Though this argument applies to *some* pacifists, I do not think it applies to *all*. One can show examples of many people who suffered a lot for their pacifist views, even dying for them.

2.

Pacifism is excessively optimistic.

Both pacifists and just war theorists (and usually also realists) hope for a world without wars. However, whereas the pacifists are typically convinced that such a world is attainable when the peace-loving people<sup>1</sup> totally refrain from the use of weapons, the just war theorists acknowledge that unfortunately it is not the case.

I side with the just war theorists: it seems to me that there are many cases throughout history where the military resistance to “evil” brings about very good results whereas the resignation brings deep and long-term damage. In my opinion (unverifiable since counter-factual) if all the “good” people refrained from using the proportionate means of self-defense, we would be totally wiped out and there would be just the “evil” ones left.

Pacifists can point out that there are examples of successful non-violent campaigns such as Gandhi’s liberation of India. There are two possible replays available for a just war theorist: (1) The example shows that *sometimes* it is indeed *morally wrong* to fight the perpetrator by use of military means. However, not always: what if the perpetrator is (unlike the British in 40s) quite ruthless and without any moral scruples? Many tyrants interpret non-resistance as weakness and take up the opportunity to commit

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<sup>1</sup> Pacifism makes sense only as being applied to peace loving (i.e. good) people: it would be a trivial truth to say “If *all* the people refrained from using weapons, there would be peace”.

greater atrocities. (2) One can grant to pacifists that it is *morally better* to fight perpetrators exclusively by use of non-military means. Nevertheless, that it is still *morally good* to fight it (sc. under appropriate circumstances) militarily. If, for instance, Tibetians defended themselves against Chinese invasion they would act *morally well*. Since they did not, they did *morally better*.

### **A difficulty for some versions of the Just War Theory**

Some pacifists hold the following view: the war involves killing of human beings. Since the killing of human beings is always wrong, the participation in war is under any circumstances wrong.

There are two versions of this view (a) radical, (b) moderate. According to (a) the killing of *any* human being, no matter what, is morally wrong. According to (b) only the killing of *innocents* is wrong. (A) bans not only the self-defense but also the defense of one's children, friends etc. Since it is a fairly rare view I shall focus on (b).

This pacifist reasoning creates a problem for those of us which want to adhere both to (1) in some circumstances, it is morally good to engage in war (2) killing of innocent human beings is always morally wrong.

Obviously, the difficulty lies in the apparent contradiction of (1) and (2). The rigorous demonstration of the non-contradiction of the two propositions is fairly difficult, it would go, however, along the following lines:

- (a) It is not always *morally* wrong to kill a human being – it is not when an *intention* to do so is missing. So, (2) should be rephrased as (2') it is always wrong to kill an innocent being *intentionally*.
- (b) All our actions have both *good* and *bad* effects. If, for instance, a doctor chooses to help patient P, he cannot - at the same time - help patient Q. If, as a consequence of the doctor's choice, the patient Q dies, it is a *bad* effect which could be foreseen but for which the doctor cannot be *morally* blamed.
- (c) Similarly, if a political community defends itself against another, while at the same time non-intentionally but foreseeably kills some innocents, it is not morally responsible for this unfortunate side effect.