

Applied Ethics (HPPH7016)

Assignment 2

Mykola Bondarenko Student No. 2307686

Essay

Can Just War Theory provide a satisfactory moral justification for war?

Within the realm of philosophical and political reflections on the nature of war, the overwhelming majority of thinkers throughout history have reached consensus on at least one fundamental point: war is an inescapable facet of human existence. On this foundation, two diametrically opposed frameworks of military ethics have emerged. The first is the so-called just war theory, while the other stands in opposition as pacifism. Notably, the radicalization of interpretations on either side invariably reduces one to either a staunchly aggressive militarist or an uncompromising pacifist. The central contradiction between these two perspectives on war lies in the fact that, although both worldviews acknowledge the inevitability of war, proponents of just war theory advocate for its moral regulation through the principles of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*, whereas pacifists call for its complete demoralization whatsoever.

Against this backdrop, I must assert that behind every attempt to moralize war, as proponents of the just war theory endeavor to do, I discern nothing but a cynical, covert effort to theorize an idealized form of warfare—driven by the subject's intrinsic desire to reconcile their own conception of a right/wrong war. When Thomas Nagel seeks to distinguish between '*means and ends*¹', portraying war through a Kantian lens of purity—arguing that we must not permit outcomes to justify our methods even if the outcomes are the best possible—I, however, find no genuine intention within such reasoning to shield the innocent from the ravages of war. Rather, it

¹ Nagel, Thomas. War and Massacre. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Winter, 1972), pp. 123-144. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2264967> (p. 124)

constitutes an ideological fetish in its most pristine form. Philosophically, this is precisely what Jacques Lacan designates as the '*objet petit a*'.² In a certain sense, it reflects a yearning for a coherent and unequivocal delineation between 'Good and Evil,' akin to the binary opposition between hobbits and orcs. This psychoanalytical imperative explains why humans continually crave the notion of a 'clean war,' preferably one characterized by selective violence, where the 'good guys' don radiant, distinguishable attire, allowing for easy differentiation from the so-called forces of evil and darkness. Such ideology soothes consciences, fostering a comforting illusion that in a 'just war,' one invariably stands on the side of righteousness. This exact worldview is promulgated by advocates of the just war theory, whose ultimate objective is to compel us to declare: 'This war is just.' Yet, in my estimation, uttering these words ensnares us in a tragic paradox. By attempting to regulate war through ethical principles from the outset, we do not curtail violence; on the contrary, we legitimize it. Consequently, any war that fulfills the criteria of a just war becomes justifiable. Effectively, this renders violence more accessible—or, arguably, more consumer-attractive. Thus, any war initiated under such conditions is subject to a defined set of entry requirements. Ultimately, once a war is classified as meeting these specified conditions, the subject is empowered to deploy bombs and chemical weapons, purportedly in the name of, say, democracy, natural rights, or cherished values. It goes without saying that if a war is deemed 'just,' then even the most brutal actions are primarily framed as advancing the triumph of justice and only secondarily as acts of violence per se.

The core issue lies not merely in the fact that just war theory seeks to justify a certain category of wars, but in something far more tragic and irreversible: it constructs an ideological

² In Lacan, this is an internal, profound desire that persists despite the subject's lucid awareness of its unattainability. Lacan., Jacques. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. Book XI. URL: <https://archive.org/details/the-complete-works-of-jacques-lacan/Lacan%2C%20Jacques/11%20-%20The%20foundations%20of%20psychoanalysis/mode/2up?q=objet+petit+> (p. 282)

framework that renders the very phenomenon of violence acceptable. Thus, jumping ahead, I contend that this perspective on violence is nothing more than an attempt to mute the volume of suffering experienced during warfare in favor of preserving the illusion of ethical order. It is self-evident and beyond dispute that any sovereign state possesses the right to self-defense and must exercise resistance in the face of military aggression—unless, of course, one adheres to the logic of radical pacifism, wherein the victim must perish at the hands of the aggressor to affirm their moral purity and sacrificial virtue. In this respect, I fully agree with Jan Narveson's conclusion: *'In saying that violence is wrong, one is at the same time saying that people have a right to its prevention, by force if necessary.'*³ Nevertheless, what the advocates of just war theory ultimately engage in is a form of ideological projection that seeks to moralize and romanticize warfare by framing it in simplistic binaries of 'Good versus Evil.' As soon as any real-world conflict is transformed into a spectacle reminiscent of Luke Skywalker versus Darth Vader, it becomes a consumable media product—a gladiatorial performance for the passive observer, who reacts with applause laced with mild concern, rather than with an urge to intervene or alleviate human suffering. Once war is viewed through such a lens, the original causes of this calculated spectacle lose their relevance. This is the essence of the insidious normalization of violence. In other words, the moment a war is adorned with the attributes of heroism, it ceases to exist as a raw, agonizing trauma. It becomes, instead, an ideological construct—a simulacrum of war. When Lacan introduced the concept of '*jouissance*'⁴, he was alluding precisely to this

³ *'In saying that violence is wrong, one is at the same time saying that people have a right to its prevention, by force if necessary. Whether and to what extent it may be necessary is a question of fact, but, since it is a question of fact only, the moral right to use force on some possible occasions is established.'* Narveson., Jan. Pacifism: A Philosophical Analysis. Ethics, Vol. 75, No. 4 (Jul., 1965), pp. 259-271 (13 pages). URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2379723> (p. 268)

⁴ Lacan's notion of '*jouissance*' denotes the subject's pursuit of an idealized form of pleasure—one that, paradoxically, bears no actual relation to *the Real* (that is, to reality stripped of ideological mediation). By contrast, this pursuit is imposed upon the subject by '*the Other*'—the deeply ideologized symbolic order that structures human desire and meaning. The tragic consequence of this striving for 'pure enjoyment,' according to Lacan, is poignantly encapsulated in his insight: *'...in the same movement by which the subject advances towards jouissance,*

phenomenon. I would go a step further and expand the term's meaning, characterizing it as the alibi of passivity, such a state in which individuals derive perverse satisfaction from their own impotence, while any display of empathy or moral concern serves merely to preserve the status quo. In my view, it is precisely this normalization—advanced, whether consciously or not, by the theorists of just war—that significantly accelerates the proliferation of violence in the modern world.

My position is as follows: when we ask, '*Can Just War Theory provide a satisfactory moral justification for war?*', we have already lost—because we have, a priori, agreed to engage with war from the standpoint of its supposed morality. This very framing is an ideological trap: the moment we consent to answer the question, we accept the premise that war can be morally conceptualized. The notion of war as a moral narrative—where forces of Good confront Evil—represents a desire to transform a brutal bloodbath into a morally comforting plotline, akin to a classic Hollywood film. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this yearning for a 'just' or 'moral' war is primarily a desire for a palatable image of war—an image the spectator-subject seeks to consume without guilt, maintaining a convenient distance that allows for empathetic observation without personal risk. Essentially, it is an attempt to derive pleasure devoid of responsibility, as though war were a form of reality television: spectators may express outrage and concern, but due to their physical and emotional detachment from the battlefield, they can afford to remain uninvolved. In my view, the essential question is not 'Is this or that war just?', but rather 'What compels us to desire a just war in the first place?'

namely towards what is farthest from him, he encounters this intimate break very close at hand, and why? Because of allowing himself to be captured en route by his own image, by the specular image. That is the trap.' Lacan., Jacques. Anxiety. Book X. URL: <https://archive.org/details/the-complete-works-of-jacques-lacan/Lacan%2C%20Jacques/10%20-%20Anxiety/mode/2up?q=+jouissance> (p. 8)

My answer to this is also psychoanalytic—indeed, I would call it Lacanian. In war, we seek ‘jouissance’ that peace, by definition, cannot offer. Peace—in the liberal-democratic sense—demands the desacralization and de-ideologization of decision-making, requiring consensus and compromise rather than absoluteness. In contrast, war creates conditions in which the subject can assert an absolute and unquestionable belief in the rightness of their views. The greatest immorality, then, lies precisely in framing war as a moral issue. The assumption here is that once we identify a suitable moral narrative, we can legitimize a ‘permissible war’—or, to borrow the euphemism, a ‘war with a human face.’ That is why, I repeat, moral justification of war is itself the most insidious form of immorality and one of the most dangerous ideologies of our time. For what is more perilous than merely supporting war, is deriving inner moral satisfaction from its spectacle. To illustrate, consider the history of the 19th century. Did any colonial empire ever declare its intervention in Africa under the slogan: ‘We want wealth and slaves?’ Certainly not. Instead, they invoked Christian values, development, and all that was implied by the so-called ‘gifts of civilization.’ Once again, we see how this hidden desire operates: the will to kill thousands—yet in a way that feels morally righteous to the perpetrator. The ultimate goal is to commit such acts and then experience satisfaction in retrospect⁵.

Let me offer another, more timely example within the context of this discussion. When Ukraine began to resist the Russian imperialist invasion, it enacted a profound act of political subjectivity. Through this resistance, it declared: ‘We exist. We have agency, we possess our identity, and we are not willing to relinquish it in favor of someone else’s ideological fantasy.’ Paradoxical as it may seem, support for Ukraine in this war does not require recourse to just war

⁵ In this regard, Slavoj Žižek was entirely correct when he characterized the horrors of the Soviet regime by stating: ‘*The horror of Communism, Stalinism, is not that bad people do bad things — they always do. It’s that good people do horrible things thinking they are doing something great*’ Nicole Jones., J. Six Questions for Slavoj Žižek. 11.11. 2011. Harper’s Magazine. URL: <https://harpers.org/2011/11/six-questions-for-slavoj-zizek/>

theory. This is not about invoking a moral metanarrative—it is, rather, about affirming ‘*the real characteristic of the political event*’⁶, in the sense articulated by Alain Badiou. Conversely, those who seek to explain this war through categories such as ‘a misunderstanding between great powers’ or ‘geopolitical interests’ inevitably transform both the war and the real resistance into a form of moral spectacle. In doing so, they depoliticize the act of defiance, stripping it of its political subjectivity and reducing it to an ethical tableau designed for comfortable consumption. A similar moralizing approach is increasingly applied to other contemporary conflicts. Take, for instance, the war in Gaza. The dominant expectation is that we must either moralize the conflict—declaring something along the lines of ‘good people are resisting evil terror’—or else depoliticize the violence through a tragic universalism: ‘Oh God, what a sorrowful confrontation.’ What is evident in both cases is the gradual erasure of the subject of violence—and with that, the political agent who bears ultimate responsibility for it. By displacing agency through moral abstraction or humanitarian sentimentality, we not only obscure the structure of the conflict, but also absolve those involved of political accountability.

The moralization of war, as proposed by just war theorists, is perilous precisely because the position of ‘Good’ under such conditions is inherently more vulnerable compared to, say, ‘Evil.’ Michael Walzer could hardly have been more mistaken when he attempted to refute the notion *that war as an act of violence differs from robbery solely because both sides believe they*

⁶ According to Badiou, a genuine political event is not a plea for moral sanction to legitimize resistance; quite the opposite—it is a spontaneous gesture, an act that emerges organically from the internal logic of the event itself. The truth of this act lies precisely in the subject’s fidelity to it, even amidst the collapse of the old normal. It is in this unwavering fidelity that the subject becomes the bearer of the event. ‘*The real characteristic of the political event and the truth procedure that it sets off is that a political event fixes the errancy and assigns a measure to the superpower of the State. It fixes the power of the State. Consequently, the political event interrupts the subjective errancy of the power of the State. It configures the state of the situation. It gives it a figure; it configures its power; it measures it. Empirically, this means that whenever there is a genuinely political event, the State reveals itself. It reveals its excess of power; its repressive dimension. But it also reveals a measure for this usually invisible excess. For it is essential to the normal functioning of the State that its power remains measureless, errant, unassignable. The political event puts an end to all this by assigning a visible measure to the excessive power of the State.*’

Badiou., Alain. Metapolitics. 01.01.2014. URL:

<https://archive.org/details/pdfy-xhOog3arEXhwAl79/page/n91/mode/2up?q=evental+truth> (p. 145)

*are fighting for justice—and therefore ought to pursue their objectives in some just manner*⁷.

When we accept war on the basis of moral premises, we automatically entrench a certain asymmetry of responsibility. Whenever ‘*Evil*’ bombs kindergartens, maternity wards, or any other civilian infrastructure, we say, ‘It’s unfortunate, but what else can we expect from Putin/Osama bin Laden/Darth Vader?’ It is entirely predictable, after all, that ‘*Evil*’ is driven by its own cannibalistic logic. However, if one day, let’s assume, Ukraine accidentally strikes a Russian civilian target with a missile, the spectator who wishes to side with ‘*justice*’ immediately falls into a moral trap. In other words, if even ‘*Good*’ commits wrongdoing, then the entire moral framework collapses. Herein lies the hypocrisy of just war theory, which functions more as a fetish than a genuine moral demand. We need ‘*Good*’ to remain impeccably pure—so that it is convenient for us to clothe in, identify with, and project it onto others.

Building upon this moral conundrum, I would like to introduce another theme relevant to my analysis. Ironically, in the contemporary liberal-capitalist paradigm, just war theory’s quest to justify only ‘*just*’ wars closely resembles radical pacifism, which opposes war as such. Both approaches seek to evade engagement with what I reinterpret from Lacan as ‘*the Real of war*’.⁸ When proponents of just war theory claim, ‘War can be acceptable under certain moral conditions,’ they entangle themselves in a web of expectations—because the moral war they describe never aligns with their idealized conception of war as an act. Meanwhile, when radical pacifists declare, ‘War is immoral,’ they simultaneously become a detached audience willing to

⁷ Walzer, Michael. Just and Unjust Wars. 1977. Basic Books. URL:

https://d11.cuni.cz/pluginfile.php/471728/mod_resource/content/1/walzer.pdf (p.128)

⁸ In Lacan, the concept of the ‘*Real*’ signifies the subject’s realization of the absence of lack. In other words, it is the subject who becomes liberated by departing from the symbolic moral order created by the ‘*Other*’. In the context of this work, I utilize the notion of ‘*the Real of the War*’ to convey what war represents as an event stripped of ideological burden, in contrast to the moral perception of it. ‘*The real is beyond the automaton, the return, the coming-back, the insistence of the signs, by which we see ourselves governed by the pleasure principle.*’ Lacan., Jacques. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. Book XI. URL: <https://archive.org/details/the-complete-works-of-jacques-lacan/Lacan%2C%20Jacques/11%20-%20The%20foundations%20of%20psychoanalysis/mode/2up?q=obj+petit+> (pp. 53-54)

watch genocide with a clear conscience, comforted by their refusal to participate. In both cases, these theories shatter against the hard rock of reality, weighed down by what I would term ethical fetishism. Both camps cling to a moral fantasy in order to avoid the harsh realities of war, emphasizing ‘the importance of being good at war’ rather than ‘being effective in resolving it.’ Whenever such a subject confronts war in reality, they attempt to maintain a certain distance from the act to satisfy their moral ‘*superego*’.⁹ Paradoxically, this subject remains a classical liberal observer for whom it is far more important that the real war conforms to their idealistic expectations, because only then can they comfortably avoid immersion in the messiness of war—even if this means allowing ‘Evil’ to prevail. Conversely, what I term ‘*the Real of War*’, as demonstrated by recent conflicts, always demands political will—specifically, active participation in the chaos of political violence to overcome it. Allow me to offer another provocative example. Consider the ethical dilemma: can we kill one person to save a thousand lives? If we reason from a pacifist standpoint, our answer must be ‘No.’ If we proceed from just war theory, however, we first verify whether the individual is a combatant, ensure that the killing is proportional, and confirm that we have legitimate authority for this act. Meanwhile, it is precisely at the moment we are blinded by our moral calculus that the greatest humanitarian catastrophes occur—bombing of civilian infrastructure or genocide of peaceful populations. My conclusion is that just war theory is merely a perverse symptom of radical pacifism. It provides us with a sense of moral involvement while cynically allowing us to keep our hands clean.

⁹ Unlike Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan attributes a more repressive and paradoxical function to the concept of the *superego*. Rather than merely prohibiting desire, the Lacanian *superego* commands the subject to pursue excessive enjoyment (*jouissance*), even when such enjoyment takes on a self-destructive or pathological form. ‘*I am pointing here to the reservation implied by the field of the right-to-jouissance. Right (droit) is not duty. Nothing forces anyone to enjoy (jouir) except the superego. The superego is the imperative of jouissance - Enjoy!*’ Lacan., Jacques. On Feminine Sexuality The Limits of Love and Knowledge. Book XX. Encore 1972-1973. Translated by Bruce Fink. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller URL: <https://dn790004.ca.archive.org/0/items/pdfy-bJ5LV1tb2PUIELsx/235786655-Lacan-Encore.pdf> (p. 3)

Another of my dialectical conclusions is that, at times, acting ethically may require breaking through a false morality—a simulacrum of ethics, so to speak. In a certain Lacanian sense, it becomes imperative to pierce the ideological veil of moralism, which only conceals the ‘*Real*’ from us. To illustrate this point, allow me to present a more provocative example. One of the most controversial episodes of World War II is the Allied bombing of German civilian cities such as Hamburg and Dresden, during which tens of thousands of people perished. Today, it is increasingly common—and not without justification—to hear such actions described as acts of barbarism, morally indefensible and strategically unnecessary. I personally agree with this assessment. However, as a Lacanian, I must pose a painful but essential question: What if such actions constituted a necessary evil—one that ultimately shattered the last remaining hopes of the Nazi war machine for resurgence? What if the refusal to undertake such measures would itself have been a form of a moral illusion, a manifestation of our unconscious desire to preserve our moral purity, even at the cost of prolonging the horror? Arguably, it would have been far more hypocritical and ethically problematic to proclaim, ‘We refuse to bomb these cities because we wish to remain liked, innocent, and untainted. Therefore, let the Nazi totalitarian project—with its gas chambers and forced euthanasia of the disabled—persist for a few more weeks or months.’ In this light, one can observe that, in a truly perverse way, the moral ideology promoted by proponents of just war theory exhibits similarly fetishistic characteristics. Let's consider the contemporary context of the war in Ukraine. From the outset, Western governments have consistently expressed strong support for Ukraine—but only insofar as Ukraine continues to be perceived as a liberal victim. The moment Ukraine attempts to strike back forcefully or inflicts what is deemed ‘excessive damage’ upon the aggressor, concern arises, and consensus around military aid begins to erode—particularly when it comes to supplying Ukraine with advanced

weaponry capable of delivering decisive blows. Yet the painful truth is this: a victim can never overcome an aggressor while remaining a passive object of empathy. At a certain point, it must cease to function as a symbol of suffering and instead become a subject of agency and force. This is deeply problematic within the framework of contemporary liberal discourse, where the symbolic strength of the victim lies precisely in their perceived weakness. However, to triumph, the victim must become the author and subject of what Lacan refers to as the ethics of desire¹⁰. Judith Butler arrives at a similar conclusion when she writes: *'Even if morality supplies a set of norms that produce a subject in his or her intelligibility, it also remains a set of norms and rules that a subject must negotiate in a living and reflective way.'*¹¹ Otherwise, the position of the victim becomes an ideological trap: the moment a victim begins to resist, they cease to be palatable in public perception—mainly because they no longer conform to the ideal of innocence and moral purity.

Thus, as I have already demonstrated, the ultimate trap of just war theory leads us to the same dead-end as radical pacifism. At its core, it fosters a commitment to remaining indefinitely in the position of the victim—demanding recognition, empathy, and justice—while evading any form of action that entails risk and responsibility. For once the victim assumes agency, they are no longer perceived as a victim. The most tragic modern illustration of this crisis within just war theory, for me, is the genocide in Rwanda. This was a case in which moral paralysis led directly to the death of nearly one million people. The ideology of just war, and the fear of violating its principles—such as proportionality or *'ultima ratio'*—effectively silenced the international community. Intervention was deemed morally inappropriate under the strictures of just war

¹⁰ 'First, the only thing one can be guilty of is giving ground relative to one's desire.' Lacan., Jacques. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis. Book VII. URL:

<https://archive.org/details/the-complete-works-of-jacques-lacan/Lacan%2C%20Jacques/7%20-%20The%20ethics%20of%20psychoanalysis/page/22/mode/2up?q=only+thing> (p. 321)

¹¹ Butler, Judith. Giving an account of oneself. 2005. Fordham University Press. URL:

<https://iberian-connections.yale.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Butler-giving-an-account-of-Oneself.pdf> (p. 10)

criteria, and thus the world stood by and watched genocide unfold. This inaction reveals more than the impracticality of the theory—it exposes a deeper hatred of reality when that reality fails to conform to moral ideals. The Rwandan genocide was neither obscure nor poorly understood, yet the obsession with upholding moral purity served only to legitimize inaction. Such inaction, I argue, is not merely a failure of moral courage—it is the greatest ethical catastrophe, often misperceived by political actors as a form of moral neutrality. Yet clearly, by doing nothing, we are permitting atrocity to continue. My fundamental objection to Just War Theory is precisely this: it says nothing about the moral cost of inaction. In this regard, it resembles radical pacifism once again. And such passivity, in my view, constitutes the most insidious and distorted form of violence. Rather than staining our hands through direct intervention, we transform the victim into a sacred symbolic object—celebrated for their ‘pure’ suffering and innocent helplessness. Hence, on the one hand, this kind of moral fantasy allows us to remain within the bounds of personal ethical comfort; on the other hand, this exactly perverse desire to preserve our own moral innocence by idealizing the victim’s suffering represents the most destructive form of contemporary ‘moral ideology.’ It has nothing to do with neutrality; instead, it legitimizes passivity and enables violence to flourish. Under these conditions, rather than intervene, we retreat into hollow gestures of sympathy: ‘We feel for them, they are so innocent.’ But this, in fact, is the pinnacle of moral hypocrisy. It is tantamount to saying: ‘Yes, it’s tragic they are suffering, but I refuse to be the kind of person capable of violence—even if it is violence directed against Evil.’

Another of my grim observations is that, due to its impracticality and idealism, just war theory has become astonishingly useful to those seeking to initiate war, rather than those seeking to resist aggression. Generally because, contrary to the claims of its advocates, it does not aim to

regulate warfare. Not at all. Its primary function is to rationalize war, not to limit it. In my view, the problem with just war theory is not that it is being exploited by warmongers—it is that it was designed for that very purpose. It has been used as a ‘*casus belli*’ for Russia’s invasion of Georgia, of Ukraine, Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, ongoing Gaza war, and numerous Turkish military operations against the Kurds etc.. Today, every imperialist action is backed by some sort of moral script or a distorted *jus in bello*, which justifies violence through vague invocations of ‘national security.’ This ambiguity does not prevent the global proliferation of warfare; rather, it offers the perfect ideological cover for modern imperialism.

Since I have already provided numerous examples illustrating that just war theory is insufficient as a moral justification for war, I would now like to present a particularly compelling case—one that, in my view, exemplifies how a radical political stance, defying the constraints of this ‘moral theory,’ was able to demonstrate real effectiveness in resolving and ending conflict. To me, one of the most intriguing paradoxes in this context is embodied in Tony Blair. I am fully aware that, today, it has become rather fashionable to reproach him for the war in Iraq and the like. However, I propose we confront an uncomfortable truth. At the moment when NATO launched its bombing campaign in Yugoslavia, Blair emerged as the unequivocal leader of the liberal West—one who did not shy away from assuming responsibility. This is precisely why the global media would continue, for years, to refer to that conflict as ‘Tony’s War.’ As the principles of just war theory were once again thrown into debate, effectively paralyzing the bureaucratic and political machinery of the EU with protracted deliberations over whether and how to respond to the crisis in Kosovo, Blair made a decisive statement: ‘*We must however ensure that we are ready to enter if we make the decision to do so.*’¹² Amid his monologue about the

¹² Tony Blair: ‘Doctrine of The International Community’, Chicago 1999. URL: https://keeptonyblairforpm.wordpress.com/2012/02/01/tony-blair-doctrine-of-the-international-community-chicago-1999/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

military-political situation in the world, it sounded roughly as follows: ‘If we wait for perfect moral clarity, we will get perfect genocide.’ From a Lacanian perspective, such a gesture has every potential to be described as truly ethical—not because it aligns with conventional notions of doing ‘good’ according to moral doctrine, but because it constitutes an act of rupture, breaking through ideological containment to confront the ‘Real’. In Lacan’s terms, Blair here acts as the ethical Subject, not by adhering to normative moral codes, but by stepping beyond them—by choosing action over paralysis, responsibility over purity.

Finally, let me scandalize you even more. What if—sometimes violence is the only moral thing to do? Not in the perverse sense in which just war theorists imagine their ‘moral wars,’ of course. Quite the opposite. We must accept, as radical pacifists do, that war is inherently immoral—that the world is messy, obscene, and perverse—and yet simultaneously acknowledge that our passive waiting for a morally perfect war allows truly immoral violence—slow, silent, bureaucratic—to persist unchallenged. Yes, my conclusion is deliberately dialectical—perhaps even Hegelian: sometimes, in order to act ethically and approximate what is good, one must take full responsibility for doing the wrong thing. Or, to rephrase it more bluntly: better a dirty deed with clean consequences than a clean conscience that lets others die. Let me now speak, for the last time, from the heart of ideological fantasy—not to deliver some Machiavellian apologia, but rather to illuminate the hidden structure of our ethical imagination. Nowadays ideology is nakedly inscribed not in various UN declarations or moral philosophy podcasts, but in pop culture products like Marvel and DC. It is there, in these cultural myths, that our desires are more honestly expressed than in any formal discourse. Take DC’s Batman, for instance. What is Batman, ultimately? He is the liberal moralist par excellence—a decent guy who strives to stop evil but refuses to dirty his hands. He desperately wants to defeat the Joker, but not at the cost of

compromising his sacred ethical code. And so what happens? The Joker plays him like a violin. Precisely because Batman refuses to act—refuses to kill, even when every reason screams that he should—evil is allowed to flourish. In Christopher Nolan's 'The Dark Knight', there is that infamous moment—arguably the purest symptom of our collective desire for 'moral purity'—when Batman speeds toward the Joker on his Batpod. Just as he's about to strike, he veers off... And, yes, crashes! He chooses his symbolic integrity over real action. That, I argue, is just war theory in Batman form: a refusal to act, hidden beneath the mask of moral superiority. It is a logic that says, 'We will fight evil—but only if we can do so with clean hands, prosecute it in court, and imprison it properly.' And so we find ourselves in a world where the most 'ethical' stance becomes inaction. We wait for ideal conditions, while hospitals are bombed, villages are burned, and genocide plays out live on FoxNews—all while we argue about proportionality. Now contrast this with Marvel's Avengers. I do not praise them blindly—but they carry with them a truth that liberal moral consciousness finds unbearable: sometimes, you cannot save the world without collateral damage. Yes, buildings fall. Yes, mistakes are made and half of New York is on fire. But the key difference is: they act. They do not wait for moral perfection. They risk guilt. They risk condemnation. They even risk being seen as villains—because they understand that the truly ethical act is not about feeling good, but about accepting the burden of doing what must be done. And that is exactly what just war theory cannot allow. It is trapped in the Batman fantasy: the fantasy of the pure hero who saves the day and remains unsullied. But in the real world—in Ukraine, in Gaza—such a position is obscene. Because in the 'Real', evil does not wait for your ethical committee to issue moral clearance. If you hesitate, it wins. To conclude, to act ethically today may very well require suspending morality as ideology. It may require risking the role of the villain in the short term—precisely in order not to become the accomplice of a far greater

evil. The tragedy is this: we live in a world that needs Avengers, but insists on being governed by Batman. And in that gap—the innocent die.

Can just war theory provide a satisfactory moral justification for war? I am afraid it cannot. A truly ethical act cannot be morally pure. In other words, a moral justification for war is impossible to find, because I agree with radical pacifists that the very nature of war is, by definition, immoral. Instead of relying on the unattainable ideal of a morally clean act with a clear conscience—as promised by just war theory—we must learn to find the courage to act without such purity, telling ourselves: ‘Yes, this may be messy. But it is the only right thing to do.’

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Mykola Bondarenko

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