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Book Review

Cynthia Nolan, PhD

The classic book on the subject of just war has been reissued. Michael Walzer's 1977 authoritative exploration of war, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* is a staple in graduate schools across the country, and this fifth edition adds a new introduction on asymmetric warfare. Every edition of the book has kept the same body but added a new spin related to the wars in vogue at the time. The first book—Vietnam War. The second edition—Gulf War. The third edition—humanitarian intervention. The fourth edition—regime change. Now, almost fifty years after the first publication of this book, Walzer's arguments still stand as the most persuasive comments on just war ever published.

The heart of the Walzer argument is that moral concepts can be applied to war and have been throughout history. He illustrates just decisions through Ancient Greece, Ancient Rome, China, WWI, WWII, and more. He assures us that just war is an inherited code of conduct conforming to morality of which all men are aware. Throughout history, he sees comprehensive and consistent moral judgments applied to all wars. Indeed, man's understanding of morality is so common and sufficiently stable that shared judgments are possible, and that is what Walzer illustrates.

So, what is just war in this shared environment? For Walzer, it is a limited war, which has moral means and ends. It is conservative; it does not seek to usurp sovereignty, and it seeks the restoration of the status quo ante. *Jus in bello* applies to the conduct of war, and *jus ad bellum* applies to the decision to go to war. Throughout history, Walzer sees examples of each. On *jus in bello*, for instance, although outside observers might point to the My Lai incident as evidence that not everyone does conduct war justly, he points to it as an aberration; it was an extreme example of a routine policy gone wrong. Rather than pointing to the atrocities themselves, Walzer emphasizes the reaction to it. It was very clearly and widely acknowledged as an example of unjust conduct. He cites universal prohibitions against torture, slavery, and murder.

On *jus ad bellum*, he says that war is sometimes justified. For example, he argued that intervention should look as much like non-intervention as possible. The preventative war of balance is not just for Walzer. However, a counter intervention to restore the status quo is just. Indeed, the American intervention in Vietnam was not justified according to Walzer, and he has explored other decisions in his 2004 book of collected essays: *Arguing War*. This 2004 book is, in some ways, easier to read than *Just and Unjust Wars*. The 1977 book spends a lot of time on the theory, while the 2004 book can focus on contemporary specifics.

Just war is, of course, not the only way to describe wartime decisions (either within war or prior to war). Walzer grapples with the realist notion of self-interest and survival by illustrating the strong historical trend of justice. Men do not conduct war—and never have—as if “might equals right” or “all is fair in war.” It is a practical morality, for Walzer. Indeed, morality can only refer to what occurs in the real world, not to general theories of right and wrong. Moral knowledge and principles do not change over time, and we are subject to common moral constraints as illustrated in Walzer’s examples.

The book can get a bit tedious as Walzer covers centuries of philosophy and theory, but this is the ONE book on just war to which everyone who writes on this subject must refer. If you are at all interested in the subject, you must start here even if Walzer’s argument can get a bit complicated. This is a history of just war, and it owes all of its arguments to the historical illustrations that Walzer chooses. You might choose different examples, and/or you might want to ask for a specific list of how to apply just war. Walzer does not give a simple list, however.

Traditional just war theory has some long-established rules coming from Catholic theologians of the third century and beyond. These rules are built on proper authority, just cause, and right intention. For a simple description, one need only consult the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 2302-2317) in which a just war fulfills four criteria: 1. War is a response to lasting, grave, and certain damage; 2. All other means of solving the problem are exhausted; 3. There is a serious prospect of success; 4. War does not produce evil graver than the evil to be eliminated. Walzer does not simplify his descriptions into four points like this, and his arguments are always rooted in the rather lengthy and extensive moral vocabulary of shared judgments.

Walzer acknowledges his debt to Catholic theologians, but he refuses to adopt their structure of right and wrong. Walzer’s just war is not about religion, the Commandments, or love for humanity. His just war is valid because history has made it so. War is a social creation, and we can judge it by its social or moral

merits. As such, war has always had a code of conduct in which justice plays a very strong role, no matter what other observers might say.