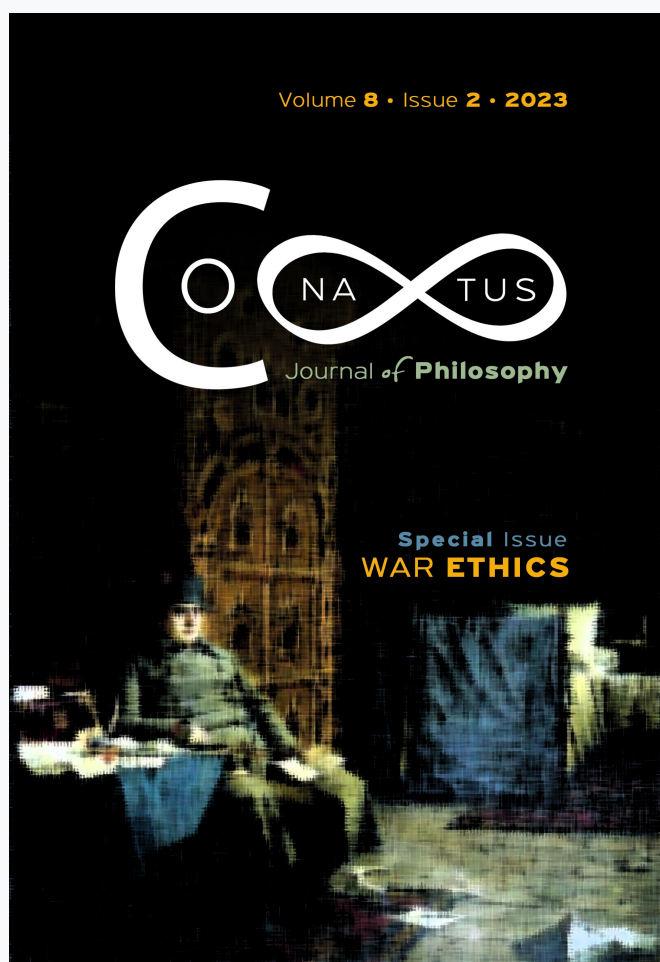


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### A 'Just Cause' or 'Just A Cause': Perils of the Zero-sum Model of Moral Responsibility for War

*Dragan Stanar*

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# A 'Just Cause' or 'Just A Cause': Perils of the Zero-sum Model of Moral Responsibility for War

**Dragan Stanar**

*Military Academy of the University of Defence, Serbia*

*E-mail address:* [dragan.stanar@va.mod.gov.rs](mailto:dragan.stanar@va.mod.gov.rs)

*ORCID iD:* <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0759-5652>

## **Abstract**

*In this paper the author aims to explain the consequences of the implicit application of the zero-sum game model of distribution of moral responsibility for war, i.e., for causing war, within the context of the dominant perspective of modern-day ethics of war – Just War Theory. The main criterion of the *jus ad bellum* concept of Just War Theory, “just cause,” recognizes the possibility of only one “cause” of war, and every attempt to further analyze and investigate deeper causes of war is automatically perceived through the zero-sum lens, as an attempt to justify or excuse the unjust side in war. No such thing happens when analyzing other, extremely morally troubling and disturbing phenomena as we invest significant effort into attempting to explain evil without this effort ever being understood as a justification attempt. The author demonstrates how the described approach in Just War Theory prevents us from fully understanding war, and thus implicitly from how to normatively prescribe human actions in and regarding war. The author also asserts that this perspective actually represents a presupposition concerning the possibility of justness of war. The author concludes that, in order to fully understand war and properly morally evaluate it, ethics of war must adopt a non-zero-sum model of distribution of moral responsibility and acknowledge the existence of a wide variety of causes of war.*

**Keywords:** *ethics of war; zero-sum game; just war theory; just cause; war; justifiableness of war*



## I. Introduction

In our pursuit to understand, predict, and ultimately control the complex and entropic nature of social reality, to proverbially “bring chaos to order” and minimize unpredictability and uncertainty, we are continuously seeking for static elements in the dynamic fabric of this reality, things that remain present and certain even when everything else changes. We are in dire need of at least some firm and steady fulcrums and points of reference so that we can “anchor” normality and historical continuity of life. History and philosophy have taught us that existence basically consists of constant and perpetual change, that *panta rhei* is the *modus existendi* of nature and society; nevertheless, we as humankind have not given up on our quest to find these static anchors, i.e., certainties of life. In an attempt to identify these few certainties, Benjamin Franklin famously wrote, in a letter to Jean-Baptiste LeRoy in 1879, that “in this world, nothing is certain except death and taxes.”<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, perhaps even tragically, reality compels us to acknowledge and recognize yet another phenomenon that seems to be certain in this world – war. By now, all illusions of historical human societies of “noble savages” which knew no war<sup>2</sup> have been dispersed.<sup>3</sup> While there still are those who argue that war is not in the nature of human beings, very few refuse to accept that it is in the “nature” of human societies. Thus, humanity’s present moment unpleasantly and violently reminds our generation of the cataclysmic reality of war, despite all our efforts to avoid it. As for the future, the possibility of war will always remain a part of political reality being “an implication of freedom and a segment of its cost.”<sup>4</sup>

It is not just the omnipresence of war upon human civilization that placed this phenomenon in the very focus of interest on basically all scientific disciplines known to man. It is also its unparalleled destructive, cataclysmic, and tragic nature that earned its central place in human thought. One of the most interesting and important perspectives of our study of war is, of course, the ethical one. As Russell famously wrote at the beginning of the XX century, the ethical perspective of war and the question of its moral justification “has been forcing itself

<sup>1</sup> Despite this ingenious thought being traditionally attributed to Franklin, it can be found in at least two previous authors – Christopher Bullock (1716) and Daniel Defoe (1726).

<sup>2</sup> Or at least some form of a “mass” armed conflict between groups.

<sup>3</sup> Radomir Milašinović and Srđan Milašinović, *Osnovi teorije konflikata* [Conflict Theory Groundwork] (Beograd: Fakultet bezbednosti, 2007), 16.

<sup>4</sup> Jovan Babić, *Moral i naše vreme* (Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2005), 148.



upon the attention of all thoughtful men.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it is quite unsurprising that contemporary ethics of war represents a field and segment of practical ethics that is very attractive, “lively,” and hopefully productive. Despite the fact that there is diversity and certainly a number of different approaches and understandings of modern-day ethics of war, including the opposed positions of pacifism and realism, it is the Just War Theory (JWT) that represents the dominant ethical tradition and the overarching framework of moral analysis of all aspects and segments of war. Contemporary JWT, in its most comprehensive form, includes four elements which correspond to different periods of war – *jus ante bellum*, *jus ad bellum*, *jus in bello*, and *jus post bellum*.<sup>6</sup> These are the conceptions we use to morally evaluate the phenomenon of war in all of its immense complexity and intricacy.

## II. *Jus ad bellum* and just cause

Probably the most written about element of the JWT is the *jus ad bellum* conception. *Jus ad bellum* is the oldest segment of JWT. Along with *jus in bello* it belongs to the “classical core”<sup>7</sup> of the theory. It is also the most intuitive one, as it analyzes the very justness of war and basically answers the question; is the war just or not? Regardless of how far back we go – not only to St. Augustin and the very “beginnings” of a coherent JWT, but also to ancient Greek and Roman thinkers – we shall encounter reasoning and argumentation regarding precisely this aspect of war.<sup>8</sup> Discussions and ideas regarding other “phases” and aspects of

<sup>5</sup> Bertrand Russell, “The Ethics of War,” *The International Journal of Ethics* 25, no. 2 (1915): 127.

<sup>6</sup> *Jus ante bellum* relates to “the way a nation goes about preparing itself and its combatants for war;” *jus in bello* deals with “*debitus modus* – the right manner of waging war, the limit not to be exceeded;” *jus post bellum* asks of the “responsibility (of victors) after victory.” Given the fact that *jus ante bellum* and *jus post bellum* are still in their theoretical “infancy,” many authors still only recognize the “classical” elements of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* as parts of JWT. Richard Schoonhoven, “The Ethics of Military Ethics Education,” in *Routledge Handbook of Military Ethics*, ed. George Lucas, 47-53 (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 47; Gregory M. Reichberg, “Just War and Regular War: Competing Paradigms,” in *Just and Unjust Warriors: The Moral and Legal Status of Soldiers*, eds. David Rodin and Henry Shue, 193-213 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 199; Michael Walzer, “The Aftermath of War: Reflections on *Jus Post Bellum*,” in *Ethics Beyond War’s End*, ed. Eric Patterson, 35-46 (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> *Jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* make the “classical” core of JWT, while *jus ante bellum* and *jus post bellum* are products of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, and still in their developmental stages.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Sorabji, “Just War from Ancient Origins to the Conquistadors Debate and its Modern Relevance,” in *The Ethics of War*, eds. Richard Sorabji and David Rodin, 13-29 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).



war, covered by the other abovementioned JWT elements,<sup>9</sup> were introduced at a much later stage. *Jus ad bellum*, in its contemporary form and volume, prescribes six criteria which must be met in order for a war to be just/justified. These criteria represent the most comprehensive set of conditions (some authors include only four or five) which “must all be fulfilled for a [...] war to be justified: it’s all or no justification”<sup>10</sup> – just cause, right intention, proper authority, last resort, probability of success, and proportionality.

Regardless of the “all or nothing” approach which implies that there is no formal hierarchy of *jus ad bellum* criteria, the intuitively “primary” one is, of course, just cause. The remaining criteria are in a way “limitations” of the “primary one,” which is the very source of JWT. Naturally, the issue of the cause of war was usually the most interesting and most important topic for all those who contributed to the tradition we today call JWT, and there is no author who disregarded or rejected the condition of just cause. Obviously, pretty much everyone but “Christ and Tolstoy”<sup>11</sup> as Russel famously wrote, throughout the entire tradition of JWT considerate there *can* be just causes for war. From the perspective of today’s JWT, there can be several different just causes for war – from the most obvious and most well-argued one, which is self-defense,<sup>12</sup> to those which are still a bit controversial and subjects of philosophical dispute, like preemptive wars and armed humanitarian interventions.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This applies also to the other “classical” element, *jus in bello*, which “as a coherent body of thought [...] does not predate the sixteenth century.” Nicholas Rengger, “The *Jus in Bello* in Historical and Philosophical Perspective,” in *War: Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. Larry May, 30-48 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 34.

<sup>10</sup> Seth Lazar, “War,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/war/>.

<sup>11</sup> Russell, 138.

<sup>12</sup> Self-defence of a nation is today “the sole *casus belli* explicitly recognized in law as justification for the use of force by states without Security Council authorization.” David Rodin, *War and Self-Defense* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 107.

<sup>13</sup> McMahan claims that “there are at least two types of offensive or aggressive war that are potentially just: preventive war and humanitarian intervention.” Jeff McMahan, *Killing in War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009), 148. Interestingly, McMahan writes of preventive, not preemptive war, as possibly justifiable (even just!), despite the fact that there is significant and substantial difference between the two, making one possibly justifiable and the other unjustifiable. More on the distinction between prevention and preemption in: Hew Strachan, “Preemption and Prevention in Historical Perspective,” in *Preemption: Military Action and Moral Justification*, eds. Henry Shue and David Rodin, 23-39 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 35-37; Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 74-85; Rodin, *War and Self-Defence*, 112-113.



### III. Just cause and a moral zero-sum game

One of the pillars of modern JWT is the assumption that it is virtually impossible for both (or all) sides to have a just cause for war – it doesn't even "recognize a theoretical possibility"<sup>14</sup> for such a situation. At most, one side can be "just," while it is perfectly possible for wars to "sometimes (be) unjust on both sides"<sup>15</sup> meaning that potentially neither side has a just cause for war; moreover, according to McMahan<sup>16</sup> it is "likely that most soldiers in the history of war have fought in the service of an unjust cause."<sup>17</sup> However, once a just cause for war has been identified for a party, modern JWT usually not only excludes the possibility of the other party to have a just cause as well, it also somehow implicitly and practically *presupposes* a sort of a "zero-sum model" of distribution of moral responsibility for war. In a sense, the issue of moral responsibility for war is observed and understood as a zero-sum game, in which even the slightest attempt to identify and explain any sort of responsibility<sup>18</sup> for war on the just side, or anywhere but the unjust side for that matter, is automatically perceived as an attempt to reduce or decrease moral responsibility for war which surely lies on the unjust side. But does ethics necessarily require a zero-sum game model of distribution of moral responsibility, especially in extraordinarily and supremely complex, intricate, even proverbially cryptic situations such as devastating mass armed conflict between large groups of people, or simply war?

Although game theory is today predominantly seen as a part of economic theory, it is intrinsically tied to understanding all forms of collective conflicts, naturally including war. As Myerson wrote in his introductory chapter to game theory, "'conflict analysis' [...] might be a more descriptively 'accurate name' for the subject than game theory,

<sup>14</sup> Dragan Stanar, *Pravedan rat – između apologije i obuzdavanja rata* [Just War – Between Apology and Restraint of War] (Beograd: Dobrotoljublje, 2019), 140.

<sup>15</sup> Jeff McMahan, "The Ethics of Killing in War," *Ethics International Journal of Social, Political and Legal Philosophy* 114, no. 4 (2004): 701.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Even if we accept this to be truth, it is undeniable that all sides in war deeply believe that it is precisely them who have a just cause for war, that all belligerent sides, regardless of the nature of war, "will always believe, often sincerely, that their own cause is just." Obviously, if belligerents could somehow agree which side actually has a just cause and "justice on their side, there would not need to have recourse to war. War begins where moral consensus ends." Rodin, *War and Self-Defence*, 164; David Rodin, "The Moral Inequality of Soldiers: Why *jus in bello* Asymmetry is Half Right," in *Just and Unjust Warriors: The Moral and Legal Status of Soldiers*, eds. David Rodin and Henry Shue, 44-68 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 59.

<sup>18</sup> Even if it is only implicit, indirect, vicarious, historical, etc.



having in mind that it represents a 'study of mathematical models of conflict.'"<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the fact that the roots of coherent game theory are found in WWII and that it was militant realism which gained the most from it, makes the connection between this theory and conflict clearly present. One of the most important models or "games" studied by game theory is the famous zero-sum game, in which there is a total and finite quantity (sum) of something,<sup>20</sup> meaning that this "something," whatever it is, can only be distributed to parties ("players" in the game) in such a way that "one's gain is always the other's loss."<sup>21</sup> Adding a certain quantity of "something" to one party necessarily means subtracting the same amount from the other; what one gains is quantitatively identical to what the other one loses.

What happens when we apply this model of "conflict analysis" to the dimension of conflict which explores, and studies moral perspectives of war, i.e., when we apply it to the issue of justness of war – more specifically, to the *ad bellum* criterion of just cause? Following the logic of the zero-sum model, every attempt to attribute any type or any quantity of responsibility to one side would necessarily imply that the other side immediately becomes equally "less responsible" for war. If we determine that one side clearly has a just cause for war, every effort to allocate at least some responsibility to that particular side would result in reducing and diminishing moral responsibility for war to the unjust side. Given that the distribution of moral responsibility for war does not follow the logic of the zero-sum model and that moral responsibility can be distributed practically *ad infinitum* without lessening anyone else's responsibility, one must wonder if such a Manichean, dogmatic, and solipsistic approach to ethics of war is plausible, even possible. When it comes to all morally cataclysmic phenomena and activities, and war is possibly "the most ruthlessly amoral of all human activities,"<sup>22</sup> or at least among the most ruthlessly amoral activities,<sup>23</sup> there certainly is plenty of moral responsibility to go around.

<sup>19</sup> Roger B. Myerson, *Game Theory: Analysis of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Depending on the context, it can be the quantity of money, pain, pleasure, utility, security, risk, etc.

<sup>21</sup> Myerson, 123.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Schulte, "Morality and War," in *The Oxford Handbook of War*, eds. Yves Boyer and Julian Lindley-French, 98-115 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 99.

<sup>23</sup> Many argue that there are other phenomena at least as amoral, or possibly even more amoral, than war – colonialism, mass humiliation, exploitation, slavery in peace, mass structural violence, etc. After all, throughout history war arose as a better, more morally preferable option to all of these phenomena.



#### IV. Implications of the zero-sum model

##### a. (Mis)Understanding war

Intuitively implicit understanding of zero-sum distribution of responsibility for war has many deep and significant implications, one of the most obvious ones definitively being that it is effectively preventing us from actually truly understanding war. Even if we unanimously accept and agree that one side in a war lacks a just cause, it by no means entails that the decision to wage such a war was made without any causality and without any (even rational!) reasons. However, if we insist that there were *no causes* and *no reasons* for a decision to wage an unjust war then such a decision is either a product of complete insanity and madness of an individual(s) who made the decision or simply a miracle. After all, “*only miracles are causeless*, and sometimes also reasonless”<sup>24</sup> and therefore they can never be taken as valid or adequate explanations of phenomena or practices. Facing with these two options, we automatically, almost by default, take the perspective from which the *cause* of the decision to wage war with unjust cause then must be criminal madness, moral insanity, pure evil, or even demonic and diabolical nature of the decision-maker. As the character of war inherently implies collective and mass conflict, such an assumption if then expanded and applied to entire nations, to millions of people who are perceived either as masses deluded by a masterful evil genius of ideological propaganda or even worse, as evil and diabolical themselves.

In our view, considering virtually all known wars in history and especially modern wars, such an approach represents an infantile and extremely naïve understanding of war and reality, an almost bizarre reductionism of extremely complex and multilayered situations generated by countless historical, political, religious, economic, security, cultural, and all other kinds of factors and circumstances.<sup>25</sup> Every attempt to go

<sup>24</sup> Jovan Babić, “Military Ethics and War: What is Changing and What Remains the Same?” in *Military Ethics and the Changing Nature of Warfare*, eds. Jean-François Caron and Marina Miron, 4-18 (Leiden: Brill Nijhoff, 2023).

<sup>25</sup> Even in the case in which there is, or at least we hope there is, absolute and undisputable consensus among morally sane adults – the case of Nazi Germany in WWII – that Hitler had no just cause to start the war, it would simply be a fallacy to claim that the *only* cause of WWII was Hitler’s undoubtable evil and moral insanity. Hitler remains equally morally guilty even if we identify hundreds of other non-Hitler and non-German factors which caused the war, to a lesser or greater extent – just because basically all historians today agree that the Treaty of Versailles left Germany in a hopeless position which made a new war almost inevitable implies neither that Germany had a just cause for war nor that Hitler wasn’t morally deranged. Additionally, if we allow ourselves to indulge in a bit of a philosophical counterfactual analysis, can we reasonably assert that WWII wouldn’t have happened if Hitler was killed instead of just being wounded as a lance corporal at



beyond such a naïve comprehension and try to understand, let alone explain, why a political decision-maker made the decision to wage war without just cause is perceived as an attempt to *justify* or *excuse* that decision, precisely because of the presupposed zero-sum model of distribution of moral responsibility, i.e., the very nature of JWT – as if identification of external causes or any reasons somehow necessarily diminishes moral responsibility of a belligerent. For the sake of clarity, and to avoid any potential misinterpretations of our assertions, it must be highlighted that simple identification of causes and/or reasons for decisions does not suggest justifying or excusing them; it only entails that it is possible to *add* moral responsibility to other agents, *without* subtracting any moral responsibility from the “unjust” side in war. It is necessary and of vital importance to identify and explain as much causes and factors that lead to war as possible, in order to adequately, or at least minimally understand it. Furthermore, minimal understanding of any phenomenon is necessary for its proper moral evaluation – *ergo*, understanding war must precede our moral evaluation of this tragic phenomenon. Thus, applying the zero-sum logic of moral responsibility to war not only directly hinders our attempts to understand it more deeply and profoundly, it also prevents us from properly morally evaluating it. What it does create is a very epistemologically and ethically comfortable position in which *all responsibility* conveniently lies exclusively on one side, and in which efforts to further investigate the genesis of circumstances that led to war are perceived as redundant, unwelcome, or even insulting.<sup>26</sup> But not so long ago, at the beginning of the XX century, it seemed clear to some that war is such a phenomenon that “all parties engaged in it must take an equal share in the blame of its occurrence.”<sup>27</sup>

#### b. Justness and justifiableness of war

Why do we then implicitly apply the zero-sum logic to the *ad bellum* issue of just cause? Interestingly, we do no such thing in other, also morally very troubling and disturbing situations – we, as a civilization,

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the Battle of the Somme in 1916? If such an assertion wouldn't be reasonable, how can we then exclude moral responsibility for WWII being attributed to many others, not just Hitler?

<sup>26</sup> Dragan Stanar, “Understanding War: Beyond Competing Narratives,” *EuroISME Ukraine Blog*, <https://www.euroisme.eu/index.php/en/views-on-war-in-ukraine/241-understanding-war-beyond-competing-narratives>.

<sup>27</sup> The poet Charles Sorley wrote this to his family in 1915, only months before being killed in battle. Not only was it clear to him that all moral responsibility for war cannot be exclusively attributed to one side, he even thought that the “blame” should be shared equally! Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 3.



are very interested in exploring what causes serial killers to kill random innocent people, what causes child rapists and molesters to violate the purest among us, etc. We do not settle for a minimalistic explanation of causality which would identify the *only* cause of killing and raping by madness or moral corruption, despite them obviously being present. Quite the opposite, we have no trouble recognizing history of family abuse, socio-economic factors, structural oversights and mistakes, institutional neglect and errors, and many more factors which caused deviant and, at times, purely evil behavior, without ever feeling that we are somehow reducing moral responsibility of killers and child rapists in the process. We simply do not apply the zero-sum logic in these cases, as it is pretty obvious that there is plenty of moral responsibility to go around and to be attributed to people and institutions even in decades preceding the heinous act. However, when it comes to immeasurably more intricate and perplexing phenomenon which involves millions of individuals actively part-taking in killing people they never met in their lives we somehow assume that it has a fairly simple and singular cause for which responsibility can only be attributed to few people, understandably on the “wrong” side.

What would happen if we today, like Thucydides once, bravely dared to explore and investigate all the historical decisions and actions which, in synergy, generated the point of no return at which peace could no longer be preserved and at which war erupted? If we went back years, decades, even centuries into history of belligerent nations and discovered a myriad of wrong decisions on both sides (and/or third parties as well!) stemming from irrationality, fear, miscalculations, misjudgments, ideological blindness, often pure arrogance and hubris, which eventually pitted two nations against each other in the bloodiest form of conflict? Could we then simply distribute moral responsibility throughout war to *all* those who made these decisions, hundreds of years ago? Well, not exactly. As ethics teaches us, we cannot be held responsible for unintended, unforeseeable and simply incalculable consequences of our decisions. We actually seldomly *know* all the consequences our decisions will eventually have, as we live in a world of freedom and incalculable uncertainty and countless possible long-term outcomes. Many historical choices not only eventually generated war-circumstances without them reasonably being foreseeable at the moment of decision-making, but were in fact very well-intended at the time they were made. None of us actually know whether the decisions we are making today will perhaps contribute to a generation of causes for some unforeseeable conflict in the next century.



However, what would be necessary for us to do is to acknowledge that at least *some* individuals, outside of the circle of those who we directly and exclusively blame for war, could be held responsible for their decisions and contribution to creating circumstances and conditions in which peace seems to be sustainable; also, that a plethora of historical events and developments contributed to the eruption of war.<sup>28</sup> And, much more importantly, we would then have to reexamine the very possibility of a just war! Here is where the explained “just cause zero-sum model” comes in very handy – we can call something *just war* only if there truly is exclusive responsibility for such an evil, which would then generate a moral duty to somehow rectify injustice and punish the culprit.<sup>29</sup> But, if this responsibility cannot reasonably be completely and utterly attributed to one single party, one “source of true evil,” then war can only be *justified*, but never *just*.<sup>30</sup> Implicit and presupposed zero-sum model of moral responsibility for war, and the Manichean image it inevitably creates, is therefore the necessary prerequisite of the very possibility of justness of war.

There is a significant difference between notions of justness and justifiableness, not only in the context of war, but in general. Justness implies a sort of righteousness, a strong normative necessity which means that we are not only justified in doing the just thing, but that we are also *obliged* to do it, that we have a *duty* to do it. Moreover, it implies that it would be unjust *not* to do the just thing – that, in case of just war, it would be unjust *not* to kill thousands or even millions of “innocent”<sup>31</sup> people, *not* to punish a nation. In the context of our inquiry, the only way we could in fact have a just war is if it is caused by personal or collective evil which needs to be punished, almost at all costs.

<sup>28</sup> There are almost countless factors and deep roots of war and all forms of mass conflict. More on the study of the manifold and multifarious seeds of historical and modern wars in Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1999); Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, *Causes of War* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> Many JWT critics, like Der Derian assert that JWT has even “mutated” just war into a “virtuous war.” James Der Derian, *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network* (New York and London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 211.

<sup>30</sup> As Babić notes, “war does not have to be just in order to be justified,” as wars are always “fought for reasons that certainly could and should be evaluated for their justness.” Jovan Babić, “Ethics of War and Ethics in War,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 4, no. 1 (2019): 10.

<sup>31</sup> Innocent both in the sense of innocence for war (combatants) and in the sense of *jus in bello* innocence (non-combatants). While combatants are not personally responsible for war and thus innocent in the ordinary sense of the word, they are *nocentes*, harming, and thus not innocent in the *jus in bello* sense of the word. Elizabeth G. M. Anscombe, *Ethics, Religion, and Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 67.



But, if we move beyond the underlying zero-sum logic of *ad bellum*, we will observe that such an explanation of any war, i.e., that war was exclusively caused by pure, unprovoked, causeless and reasonless evil or moral insanity of individuals, or even entire nations which must be somehow punished, is in fact deeply wrong and even childishy absurd. Of course, reality of war does not necessarily exclude evil and morally corrupt individuals, but it does not limit responsibility to them<sup>32</sup> nor does it allow us to rationally and reasonably identify them as sole causes of war. War is never neither Manichean in its essence nor a product of a singular cause. Therefore, the truly tragic nature of war<sup>33</sup> and the overwhelmingly complex and entangled genesis of circumstances and conditions which cause it, make it impossible for war to be just.

It can, nonetheless, be very justified, as “justifiableness does not imply justness but necessity.”<sup>34</sup> We can be justified in doing something when it is necessary and when it represents our best (forced) option, but it does not entail any normative necessity, nor does it negate the tragic nature of a situation, in which we find ourselves. The complex reality of life often articulates situations in which we are justified to do something to someone, without him or her being blameworthy or “guilty” for something – we are justified to do something (even violent!) but it is not necessarily a just thing to do. It is simply a matter of a tragic situation in which we are “trapped” by factual reality, and which we did not necessarily create. In that sense, self-defense of a nation is absolutely justified, but it does not stop us neither from researching, analyzing and attributing responsibility for war to various agents (not just the one(s) who made the decision to attack) nor from finding causes for war in different preceding decisions, actions or events, even in previous decades and centuries, which ultimately prevented us from avoiding war. In a sense, JWT is right when it postulates that war cannot be just for both sides. But, we would argue and add that it indeed *cannot be just* for either side. At best, war can be justified, and it, indeed, often is.

<sup>32</sup> And, as explained and accentuated before, attribution of additional responsibility to others does not diminish moral responsibility of evil and morally corrupt people, as it is not a zero-sum game!

<sup>33</sup> As a cataclysmic outcome of accumulation of numerous previous historical personal and collective errors, fallacies, naiveness, foolishness, hubris and ultimately our inability to control the fragile order and peace due to insurmountable uncertainty of reality. Many authorities in the study of war, including some of the most famous ones like Clausewitz, Morgenthau, or even Thucydides, understood this tragic nature of war. More in Richard Ned Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 14-113.

<sup>34</sup> Jovan Babić, “Rat i pravoslavlje: filozofski osvrt” [War and Orthodoxy: A Philosophical Perspective], in *Pravoslavlje i rat* [Orthodoxy and War], ed. Borislav Grozdić, 321-327 (Beograd: MC Odbрана, 2017), 324.



What's more, the "flow" of historical events can even articulate such circumstances and conditions in which war can factually be *justified* for both sides, regardless of how intuitively counterintuitive this claim may seem in the context of the modern JWT-dominated discourse on ethics of war.

## V. Conclusion

Regardless of the position one takes on the spectrum of overall historical optimism/pessimism, civilizational progress/decline, one dreary conclusion seems to inescapably loom over all humanity; that war is here to stay. Even if we accept the today-popular Creveldian vision of war, which is constantly adapting and transforming in its "grammar,"<sup>35</sup> we cannot but admit that its inherent "political logic"<sup>36</sup> and its very essence remain the same. Therefore, as long as there is sovereignty, interest, and politics, nations will proverbially keep "their weapons pointing, and their eyes fixed on one another,"<sup>37</sup> even when there is no visible or foreseeable threat on the field of international relations. Perhaps the present moment in the global political arena perfectly depicts this latent and underlying omnipresence and ever-presence of the *potential* of war, which faithfully shadows human civilization, in all of its stages and phases.

This places a heavy burden of monumental responsibility on the shoulders of all those who dare to study, analyze, and explain the phenomenon of war, including, of course, students of its moral dimensions. Contemporary ethics of war, and JWT as its dominant framework, must therefore prioritize efforts to genuinely understanding war before morally evaluating it. The implicit zero-sum game model of distribution of moral responsibility for war, in the described context of the *ad bellum* just cause criterion, includes not only not contributing to understanding war, but it is hindering it by perceiving every attempt to identify deeper historical and wider political causality of war as an attempt to justify or excuse unjust wars. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why "even the acknowledged experts – the theorists of the just war – disagree among themselves about the justice of virtually every war"<sup>38</sup> as if complete moral responsibility simply *must* be attributed to one side! But such noble intellectual endeavors are in no way, shape, or form necessarily aimed at excusing or justifying unjust wars; nor does

<sup>35</sup> Martin Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1991).

<sup>36</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 252.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 85.

<sup>38</sup> McMahan, *Killing in War*, 120.



identification of additional and deeper root causes of war reduce moral responsibility of the unjust side. Why cannot “a just *cause*” be “just a cause,” one out of many causes of war, when evaluating it morally?

It is worth repeating it again; war is not a case of zero-sum game and there is plenty of moral responsibility in it to be added to different agents without the need to subtract it from anyone. However, if we continue to insist that responsibility for war must almost exclusively be attributed to one side, and that there is a singular *casus bello*<sup>39</sup> by which we “measure” its justness, we will continue to be “shocked” by inexplicable, irrational and unprovoked wars which will surely keep “surprising” us as they will continue to be perceived as events caused by unpredictable and reasonless decisions of evil people, for the sake of evil.<sup>40</sup> In order to fulfil its purpose, JWT must dig much deeper into the genesis of any war before evaluating it morally. It must first take into account the historical, political, cultural and such causes of war so that it could properly identify and distribute moral responsibility among many different agents. History must be to ethics of war what mathematics is to natural and technical sciences – the foundation and “infrastructure” for *understanding* war before all and any moral evaluation! Isn’t that the point of ethics of war; to evaluate within the boundaries of what is factually existing instead of prescribing within what is an ideally imagined world? One is a practically useful application of philosophical method to a highly morally complex phenomenon of war, while the other is but an apology of a Manichean-punitive war.

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<sup>39</sup> It is precisely *casus belli* that is exclusively being “judged” by the *ad bellum* criterion of just cause. But, *casus belli*, by definition, refers only to the singular, direct “provocative act” that justifies making or declaring war. Bryan A Garner, *A Dictionary of Modern Legal Usage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 137. As such, it, again by definition, completely ignores the entire historical and political chain of causality which brought two nations to the point of war. It is difficult to understand how such an approach can be legitimately used to evaluate justness of wars, as it excludes all previous events and decisions, the entire causality linked with the moment of *casus belli*.

<sup>40</sup> As French eloquently presents it in his short allegory, humans seem to be “insufficiently demonic,” as they are incapable of doing and wanting evil for the sake of evil. Peter French, *War and Moral Dissonance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 72-84.



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