

Applied Ethics
Michaelmas Term 21/22
Lectures 1-5
The Ethics of Killing in War
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Intro and Reading

It isn't generally permissible to kill other people. But in war it can be. So goes the orthodox view anyway (pacifists disagree). But what exactly are the rules that govern when it is ok to kill in war and when it is not, and what justifies these rules? There is a very old tradition – called the just war tradition – dating back to early Christian theologians that attempts to clarify this. The tradition – at least in its latest incarnation - is well established in both 'common sense' morality and the law. But is it sensible? We explore the important recent criticism of some of its key claims by Jeff McMahan in his book *Killing in War*. This is one of the most important works in contemporary moral philosophy by one of the finest contemporary moral philosophers. It is a hard read but it is worth it. In this five-week course I act as your guide to it.

You must read:

- *Killing in War* by Jeff McMahan. 2009. The library are aware that a lot of people are going to be requesting this so there should be plenty of availability, whether as an ebook or a paper copy.

If you read this and nothing else that is absolutely fine (and I *will* be able to tell if you haven't read it but are simply relying on my guide notes, or on summaries!). However, if you want to read some additional sources, this will of course benefit you. Below are my suggestions. I offer them *as suggestions*, not as requirements or anything like it; you are now final years students and it is up to you to – with some help – make sensible choices about what to read given your interests. You're always welcome to come to ask me.

McMahan's thought is summarised in his articles. There's a lot of overlap with the book (a lot of the material is identical) so if for whatever reason you can't access the book, you should read the articles. You could try for example:

- Jeff McMahan. On The Moral Equality of Combatants. *Journal of Political Philosophy*. 2006.
- Jeff McMahan. Collectivist Defences of the Moral Equality of Combatants. *Journal of Military Ethics*. 2007.
- Jeff McMahan. The Basis of Moral Liability to Defensive Killing. *Philosophical Issues*. 2005.

These and many more are available at his website here:

<https://www.philosophy.ox.ac.uk/people/jeff-mcmahan#tab-2391051>

McMahan's opponent throughout is Michael Walzer. You could try:

- Michael Walzer. *Just and Unjust Wars*. (Many editions, originally 1977).

It's an enjoyable read:

One of the best contemporary authors on the ethics of war is Helen Frowe. She has written the following two books, both of which are worth a look (the former is easier than the latter and has broader scope, the latter is more focused on self-defense than war, especially part 1):

- Helen Frowe. *The Ethics of War and Peace: An Introduction*. 2011.
- Helen Frowe. *Defensive Killing*. 2014.

One of the big topics we'll be looking at is the morality of using force in self-defence. When, if at all, is it ok?: Here there are some great recent pieces (available in journals to which you have access through the library or often as pre-prints if you google them)

- JJ. Thomson. In Defense of Abortion. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. (1991).
- Mike Otsuka. Killing the Innocent in Self-Defense. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. (1994).
- Helen Frowe. Equating Innocent Threats and Bystanders. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*. (2008).

Finally, you could look at some of the responses to McMahan and/or articulations of positions very different from McMahan's, including but (far from) limited to:

- Christopher Kutz. The Difference Uniforms Make. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. 2005.
- Michael Walzer. Response to McMahan's Paper. *Philosophia*. 2006.
- Seth Lazar. Responsibility, Risk and Killing in Self-Defense. *Ethics*. 2009.
- Seth Lazar. The Responsibility Dilemma for Killing in War, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2010.