

2. *“Now morally practical reason pronounces in us its irresistible veto: There is to be no war, neither war between you and me in the state of nature nor war between us as states, which, although they are internally in a lawful condition, are still externally (in relation to one another) in a lawless condition; for war is not the way in which everyone should seek his rights.”* – Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1795)

Enlightenment-era philosopher Immanuel Kant expresses a pacifist view in proposing that war is morally impermissible. He argues that “morally practical reason” would allow anyone to understand that “there is to be no war” between any entities, person or state. Furthermore, he points out that even if war may be “internally in a lawful condition” – that is, if war is deemed legal by state constitution or some other man-made edict – then that still does not justify the act of going to or participating in war, as war is still “externally... in a lawless condition,” signifying that moral rightness transcends any human law or judgment – it is something absolute, as if existing “in the fabric of the universe.” Hence, Kant also expresses deontological view in the quotation. In this essay, I shall discuss the concept of rights and whether war can ever be morally justified or considered necessary, in relation to deontological and consequentialist perspectives. I shall then evaluate Kant’s claim.

Deontology is a position in normative ethics that judges the moral worth of an action based on existing moral principles. Two famous deontological views are Kantian deontology and command theory ethics. Although the two share this similarity in the method by which they judge actions, the two can in fact have opposing arguments concerning the justifiability of war. Kant argues that by reason, the only feasible possibility is that war is wrong – reason permits us this “irresistible” truth.

Command theory ethics may claim that war is justifiable in the case of serving God’s purpose or protecting the law of God, for example. However, since war often results in killing, this seems somewhat contradictory, considering that command theory ethics are based on the ten commandments, one of them being that “thou shalt not kill” and, as one would assume, this means that it is absolute since it is believed to have come directly from God. Arguing that war is justifiable, while also believing that killing is always wrong, is problematic and unconvincing in the command theory ethics’ position of war being justifiable.

According to Kantian deontology, on the other hand, war is immoral because it “is not the way in which everyone should seek his rights,” which expresses the importance of “rights” in Kantian deontology. It is the concept of our rights that determines the ways we should act. If people have the right to truth, for example, then it is only reasonable that all other people allow them the opportunity to have the truth (and nothing but the truth); therefore, the act of lying would be morally wrong because it violates a person’s rights.

For example, if a person storms into the President’s office, assuming of course that she has gotten through security somehow and managed to find the specific location of this office (or that she is with some fellow revolutionaries who have organised a coup), and demands to know the truth about the arrest of, say, her brother, the President should, in fact must according to Kantian deontology, tell her the truth because she has the right to the truth. Moral action in Kantian ethics is based on the system of rights and duties - if someone has a right to something, other people have a duty to allow them that right or in the very least not stand in the way of them having their rights. Kant brings in this concept of rights in the quotation by implying that war is not a right and, as such, people cannot start or allow war.

One might then ask if war is the only way to stop one potential belligerent from raging war, which may seem paradoxical. A famous example of this is in the case of the 1930’s when the aggressive foreign policies of nations like Germany (with the invasion of Czechoslovakia and Poland), Italy (with the invasion of Abyssinia), and Japan (with the invasion of Manchuria) was upsetting the fragile balance of attempted peace and “collective security,” resulting in the early actions of other nations to appease these aggressor nations. This appeasement can be viewed in two ways. Either they were dishonourable cowards for not stopping these nations from invading neutral territory or by choosing not to go to war and trying to appease these nations, they were acting morally correctly.

Kantian deontology clearly tells us that an action is either right or wrong, and that this is always the case. If a terrorist threatens to blow up a supermarket with 80 people inside (including, coincidentally, the Prime Minister of Canada) if you choose not to rob a bank and give him your “earnings”, then it would be morally wrong for you to rob that bank, just as it would be for the terrorist to blow up the supermarket. If you choose to rob the bank, thus preventing him from blowing up the supermarket (though perhaps one could ask if he was ever going to do it, or whether one can trust that he will not do it once the money has been given to him), you have acted morally incorrectly even if the result is that 80 people get to live and a despicable villain gets a reward at the expense of your possible imprisonment.

Going back to the appeasement example then, according to Kant, it would be right to appease the aggressor nations rather than preventing them from action by war. Contemporaries like Winston Churchill argued that Hitler could and should have been stopped in the inter-war years, even with the possibility of war, because it would have prevented the tremendously

vicious later ambitions of Hitler, concerning, for example, the seizure of land in Eastern Europe for the German population (the policy of lebensraum) or the extermination of people like the Jews, Roma, and Slavs.

It can then be argued that war may sometimes be necessary to stop even greater war – that is, a negative action might be justified if the result is better than it would have been otherwise. This expresses the view of consequentialism – that an action’s moral value is determined by its consequences. A small war in the 1930’s could have crushed Hitler before Nazi Germany was completely restored from the consequences of World War I, thus preventing the atrocities that the Nazis would commit on a grand scale, or it could have resulted in general war in Europe several years before 1939. These two possible consequences serve to highlight a problem of consequentialism. One can never predict the future with certainty, so an ethical system like consequentialism must confront the possibility that the expected outcome (the beneficial one) may not actually occur, and instead a much more negative one may.

Take as another example a car that is speeding out of control, which seems to be heading directly towards a classroom full of kindergarteners. Witnessing this, you decide that to save the children you must drive your own car in front of the speeding car early enough so that this wreck will be far enough from the children so that they are not harmed by flying debris or such. In doing so, you actually manage to stop the speeding car, but seconds before you lose consciousness you look to the kindergarten and notice the children and teachers are almost done evacuating. Sure, you have saved the building from being destroyed, but at the expense of your life, which arguably is much more important than a building that can be rebuilt.

Consequentialists would argue that if you did not stop the speeding car and the kindergarteners had been killed, you would be to blame because you could have stopped it. However, as the outcome is not directly predictable (the children may escape, rendering your action meaningless), this view is problematic. In arguing this, I am not necessarily justifying inaction, because of course action regarding an uncertain future can have meaningful results, for example donating to aid organisations to help starving people get enough food. However, in the context of war, I would argue that consequentialism cannot justify a necessity to go to war, because the future is very unpredictable.

In starting a war to prevent a bigger, more damaging war from occurring, there is no guarantee that this “small war” will be successful in preventing the “greater” one. Even if it is, we would never be able to know this because we would not have experienced that alternate future – we would only have the experience of the small war that is likely to have negative effects of its own, such as the death of many people, which are reasonably incomparable to the “greater” war because we have never experienced it. One can always say, “It could be worse.” Perhaps it can be, but that then does not necessarily justify the current situation, which likely could be very unpleasant. For example, in the case of having severely strict laws with equally

severe punishment, such as going to jail for being ten minutes late. These laws and punishments could effectively halt crime because people would be so terrified of breaking the laws, meaning that without the laws “it could be worse,” but this current situation can also be considered negative, as it limits certain freedoms and may cause severe stress to people under these laws, and it punishes everyone in this way for the actions of a few potential criminals. Therefore, just because one can speculate that without a certain action, like going to war, things could be worse, this does not in itself mean that war is necessary. There is always, after all, the possibility of diplomacy and in the case where diplomacy does not work, trade embargos and blockades can be imposed on the aggressor nation, which could prevent war.

While command theory ethics and consequentialism attempt to justify war in some instances, Kant remains opposed to the justification of war in his consideration of reason, the absoluteness of morality, and his belief that war is not a right. Reason is important to Kantian deontology because it is to Kant the only trustworthy judge of an action’s rightness or wrongness. War can be incredibly emotional – with the death of family and friends, the loss of savings in the seemingly frequent consequence of inflation, and so on – and as such, it could spark a desire for revenge. A humiliated nation may rage war or consider it necessary or justifiable due to feelings of intense anger, possibly clouding rational judgment.

Reason would tell us that war will result in the harm of both sides, that of the aggressor and the one being attacked, either in terms of death, economic cost, or even psychological effects, but emotion can cause us to either ignore or forget this. Therefore, according to Kantian deontology, when a person makes a decision in consultation with only emotion, the decision is less morally valid, precisely because it ignores the morality of an action – that is, if the action is right or wrong independent of human thought as opposed to whether it feels right or wrong, which cannot be a judge of morality because emotions are subjective whereas morality is objective. This view itself is subject to a lot of criticism, from consequentialism, for example.

War according to Kant is wrong and therefore cannot be justified because it is “externally... in a lawless condition,” which connects to this idea of morality being objective. One could defend this concept by showing that when a law is not absolute – that is, when it can be right in some circumstances and wrong in others – it loses its credibility. For example, if stealing was wrong yesterday, but acceptable today, what would it be tomorrow? War is always wrong in Kant’s perspective then because it can never be acceptable to kill, pillage, or psychologically damage someone under any circumstances, for whatever reason, because these actions are absolutely morally wrong.

Consequentialism, on the other hand, could argue that in some cases war is justifiable because it could result in a better outcome. However, as I argued earlier, this is problematic because the future cannot be predicted certainly and so claiming that an action is beneficial because it prevented a worse outcome cannot be trusted entirely. Command theory ethics, too, has a

major problem in that it contradicts the very base of its entire system. It argues that God's commandments are absolute and that they are the only viable source of moral knowledge, but then allows some justification of war in instances such as when war is waged by those acting through the will of God. Perhaps this may be a result of a misunderstanding of God's wishes. In any case, Kant's deontological system does not escape unscathed.

In instances where committing a morally wrong action may serve to provide a much better outcome, deontology can seem backwards or over simplistic in its insistence on follow a "black-and-white" order of morality. For example, if a person is in danger of being murdered by a person and his only practical option seems to be self-defence, it would seem odd in modern context to condemn a person for protecting themselves from a villainous assailant. If this self-defence results in the unintentional killing of the attacker, perhaps it can be justifiable. Claiming that he acted morally wrongly by not allowing himself to be killed seems rather problematic. So, in certain instances Kantian deontology may not be the best judge of the morality of an action – that is, it is not perfect and infallible.

However, in the case of war, Kantian deontology has some sensible merits. By using reason to make a moral judgment, we are able to discover the rightness or wrongness of war. If one just considers what war means – death, suffering, poverty, famine in many cases, economic despair – it seems hard to justify it. Perhaps, as consequentialists would highlight, it may result in a more favourable outcome than if, for example, a nation chooses not to fight back and just be attacked instead, but whether or not it does, however likely it seems, it does not necessarily make war right, even though it can result in the best outcome. It is my view that a "right" action and the "best" action are not always the same thing; I, for one, could never believe that a crime like rape could be morally acceptable, under any circumstance, even if for some reason it results in an outcome that benefits (or satisfies) several more people than were harmed.

In the case of war, then, I must agree with Kant that war is never right, precisely because it has the potential to result in so much harm – for example, acts of genocide (e.g. Armenian genocide and the Holocaust), mass-killings (e.g. The Nanking Massacre of 1937), battles where huge scores of people can die (e.g. The Battles of the Somme and Verdun in 1915), the fact that civilians can be attacked as a ploy to lessen morale, and so on. I hold the view that war is never "right," even if in some instances war might result in a "better" outcome, whether we are aware of it or not or whether we can ever predict this or not.