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Research Guide Series

**Military Ethics
& Just War**

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Military Ethics and Just War

War is an ethical problem because it obligates us to do abroad what would be illegal and immoral at home, namely to kill strangers ... to hold innocent men, women and children hostage ... to lay waste to their environment and plunder their national treasures; and to do all this in the name of economic, political and ideological agendas.¹

As the recent conflicts in the Gulf and Afghanistan have shown, military ethics and theories of just and unjust war remain of equal importance to modern nation-states in the opening decade of the 21st Century as they were for St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas and the medieval world.

Current thinking on military ethics posits four main theories: Militarism, where a society practices constant preparation for war and the subordination of civil control to the military; Pacifism, the moral opposition to war and other forms of violence; Realism, which resists the application of moral values to war; and Just War, which argues that war can only be waged justly under certain conditions.

In diametric opposition to any moral justification of war are the equally widely held concepts of the individuals' inalienable right to life and the inviolate right of sovereign states to survival. In terms of military action the issue is further complicated by the concepts that every army has the right to win, that military necessity requires no action be prohibited if it is required for victory, that armies that are illegally attacked have a right to respond legally in kind, and that soldiers, obligated as they are to obey the orders of their superiors, cannot be charged with war crimes or crimes against humanity when acting under their superiors' orders.

This bibliography has been designed to provide a guide as to where to find information on military ethics and just war theory. Please note that the list of references below is a selection of the more relevant titles and information on the subject. The list is not intended to be exhaustive or definitive but is an introductory guide to some of the resources available.

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