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Killing In War (Uehiro Series In Practical Ethics)



Synopsis

Killing a person is in general among the most seriously wrongful forms of action, yet most of us accept that it can be permissible to kill people on a large scale in war. Does morality become more permissive in a state of war? Jeff McMahan argues that conditions in war make no difference to what morality permits and the justifications for killing people are the same in war as they are in other contexts, such as individual self-defence. This view is radically at odds with the traditional theory of the just war and has implications that challenge common sense views. McMahan argues, for example, that it is wrong to fight in a war that is unjust because it lacks a just cause.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Review from previous edition: "In this densely argued and superbly written volume, Jeff McMahan provides a comprehensive defence of the claim that moral liability to attack in war follows from responsibility for the threat of harm posed by a war fought without a just cause... McMahan's thesis conflicts with numerous principles central to the currently dominant, though increasingly contested, understanding of just war theory... The comprehensive nature of McMahan's discussion... makes clear why those concerned with the morality of killing in war must engage with it. Indeed, I believe that *Killing in War* ought to replace Michael Walzer's venerable *Just and Unjust Wars* as the text around which practitioners and theorists alike construct debates over the ethics of waging war." --David Leftowitz, *Transnational Legal Theory* "McMahan's challenge to Just War theory in this gracefully written and challenging presentation is extremely important and deserves close

attention... [He] performs an extremely important service in...providing us with a sophisticated and original contribution to the debate. This book will be widely read and debated and deservedly so; anyone working on these topics will have to grapple with McMahan's subtle and important analysis of the issues." --Whitley Kaufman, *Ethics* 07/05/2010 "Killing in War is the high-water mark of just war theory since *Just and Unjust Wars*." --Seth Lazar, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*

27/04/2010 "McMahan argues... that there is something terribly wrong with just war theory... By the end of the book, many readers will wonder how anyone could feel otherwise... McMahan develops [his] view with uncommon thoroughness, setting out numerous objections, and presents replies with the comprehensive efficiency of a medieval summa." --Douglas Lackey, *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 19/04/2010

"Jeff McMahan has written an important, highly intelligent book... [It is] densely packed with intricate argument, well-informed, carefully written, and full of insight, scholarship, and tough argument." --C. A. J. Coady, *Australian Book Review*

19/04/2010 "McMahan's book is a great achievement. His writing is lucid and the book stands as the most comprehensive and sophisticated criticism to date of both the idea of 'moral equality' of combatants and that civilians and soldiers can delegate their moral responsibility for the waging of an unjust war to their government." --Uwe Steinhoff, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*

08/10/2009 "[It is] a commonplace in modern thinking about political obedience and participation in war [that] soldiers aren't responsible for the wars their leaders initiate - however wrongly - and that if they fight in an unjust war, they are free from blame so long as they do so humanely, respecting the rules of discrimination and proportionality. Jeff McMahan's eloquent and rigorously argued book launches a devastating attack on this belief, showing why it cannot be sustained in international law or in the theory of the just war that supports it. As a challenge to the received wisdom, the significance of McMahan's central claim cannot be overstressed." --Christopher Finlay, *Political Quarterly* 17/02/2010

"I found this work so convincing that it is difficult to raise many criticisms... Killing in War represents a tremendous achievement from one of today's leading moral philosophers. Never before has a book so swiftly challenged my own views and convinced me that I was in error. I cannot recommend it highly enough." --Thom Brooks, *Times Higher Education Supplement* 08/10/2009

"Ultimately, as McMahan expertly demonstrates, there is really nothing - not institutional command, procedural guarantees, the 'special' nature of war itself, the description of combat - that adequately and cleanly differentiates war from non-war. This being so, we need to radically rethink the way we justify war, the way we fight in war and the agency of the combatants we get to do our fighting for us... McMahan's book urgently needs to be read not only by combatants, to whom McMahan restores a real and profound sense of moral agency and autonomy, but by anyone

who has voted for, backed, or declared war of any kind... McMahon's book offers some fine, clear answers" --Nina Power, The Philosophers Magazine 23/11/2009"Jeff McMahan has written a genuinely revolutionary book... Once advanced, McMahan's thesis seems obvious, and it is his considerable philosophical merit to make us realize how obvious it is... McMahan is a very careful philosopher; as soon as he states a thesis, he thinks of qualifications, objections, and rebuttals... He does not operate from a general theory but proceeds from case to case, weaving an intricate web of subtle distinctions Killing in War is a distinguished contribution to moral theory." --David Gordon, The Mises Review 15/06/2009

Jeff McMahan is Professor of Philosophy at Rutgers University. He works primarily in ethics and political philosophy, and occasionally in metaphysics and legal theory.

This is an excellent book on just war theory or the ethics of war. It touches on all major aspects of the current debates within the morality of war both the morality of going to war (*jus ad bellum*) and conduct in war (*jus in bello*). The major thesis is one that I don't find all that surprising but it maybe surprising to many others: that unjust combatants don't have the same moral standing as just combatants. Many of the traditional just war theorists, and how international law sees it as well, both just and unjust combatants have equal moral standing on the battle field and both are permitted to kill each other. But McMahan argues (persuasively) that all of the available arguments to support this claim are deficient in one way or another. McMahan takes a very "fine grained" approach to attribution of blame and responsibility in the conduct of war and also its causes, meaning that his approach seeks to make nuanced distinctions between the moral complexities of wars while many other theorists have used much coarser-grained approaches such as grouping all civilian non combatants together or all combatants together as to their moral standing, etc. Other important findings include: 1. That many of us are likely far more culpable and responsible for the unjust actions of our government in war than we often (would like to) believe and that this has important consequences for our moral standing. 2. That not all combatants, both within just groups and within unjust groups, share equal moral standings (some are far more culpable and responsible than others). 3. That some civilian non combatants are (though rarely) justifiably liable to be attacked by just combatants, and here McMahan gives a contemporary example and a historical example of non combatants that fits this criteria for this kind of moral liability. Where I felt the book could have done a little better was that there were some parts of it that was quite philosophically convoluted. Though still well written, these parts could have used some (preferably real) examples sprinkled in between

the arguments. Very complicated moral nuances are distinguished and discussed between the different kinds of rights and circumstances that are relevant. They are examined in depth from every direction possible but the lack of examples in some parts makes those sections dry and seem too "ivory tower." But this is a minor quibble as the work is quite well written in general. McMahan (here and elsewhere) argues from analogy (as many just war theorists do) between the morality of personal self-defense and that of war. Much of his argument depends on a close analogy but I would also have liked for McMahan to talk more about the glaring disanalogy between the rare (perhaps only hypothetical presently) cases of military occupation without intent or reasonable likelihood of deaths or serious bodily injury to anyone on the just side. McMahan agrees that occupation of one's ancestral lands offer sufficiently good moral reason to kill potential or actual unjust occupiers. But if that seems to be at tension with laws and their moral foundation in self-defense for no state (except maybe Texas, Florida and a few other states) allows killing to defend property alone but only if the perpetrator intentionally threatens someone's life or gives reasonable threat of serious bodily injury is lethal self-defense allowed. If a foreign unjust power decides it only wants some other nation's land to occupy, perhaps for the resources on that land, but has no intent to physically harm any of the citizens of that land, then what is the reasoning behind allowing the citizens of that land to use deadly force to defend against the occupation? The import is that this could open up room for a defense of a weak kind of pacifism which McMahan does not discuss in depth. This question I think could be answered competently by McMahan or other just war theorists while maintaining the general analogy but it is one minor lacuna that kept me unsatisfied.

Actual rating 4.5 Anyone seriously interested in the just war tradition is wrong not to be familiar with Jeff McMahan's work on the topic. In this work, McMahan goes after some sacred cows that virtually all non-pacifist writers about the ethics of war have taken for granted for centuries on surprisingly weak ground. Foremost among these is the idea of the moral equality of combatants; that is, that combatants on both sides of a given war are moral equals regardless of whether they are fighting for a just cause or an unjust cause. The traditional view has it that, upon becoming combatants, combatants abdicate some of their right not to be killed in exchange for an expanded set of permissible actions, namely, the right to kill. McMahan denies that combatants on the just side of a war actually do this. If their cause is just, he argues, why should it be more permissible to kill them than "innocent" civilians? After all, both are innocent in the relevant manner. I find McMahan is unbelievably persuasive in making this argument. If the book leaves anything to be desired it is that

it is too narrow. We never really get a full-fledged account of justice of war. In fairness, the book never set out to do this. Still, I felt like a broader account would have been more fulfilling.

Jeff McMahan's book is a well-written discourse on an important topic that provides well-structured and considered problem of the individual warrior's responsibility for fighting in an unjust war.

Outstanding title and a worthwhile read. delivered in a timely fashion. A worthwhile look into the phenomenon of killing in war. A good compliment to Dave Grossman's. "On Killing."

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Jeff McMahan challenges the reigning orthodoxies regarding the morality of killing in war. One of his main theses, for example, is that (usually) it is not permissible for combatants fighting without a just cause to attack combatants fighting with a just cause -- unjust combatants who do otherwise violate the rights of just combatants. The book is engaging, thorough, readable, creative, and well argued. I highly recommend it.

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