Philosophy 118/ War and Morality

This course explores a variety of moral questions associated with both war in general and particular kinds of warfare. How, if at all, does war differ from murder? Under what conditions can a particular war be justified? Where do we draw the line between defensive and offensive actions? Can a just war be restricted morally with respect to its tactics? Is torture ever justified? What is the moral status of “innocents” in arguments about the justifiability of particular modes of warfare? What, if anything, is special about terrorism? How – according to what principles – can we ascribe responsibility for harm in wartime? Does collective responsibility for war crimes make sense? Is pacifism a coherent doctrine? a justifiable practice?

While the readings in the course frequently make use of historical examples, they are squarely in the fields of ethics and political philosophy. So, too, is the course itself.

Course Requirements: Two papers (7-8 pages) and a final exam. Class attendance is mandatory. Participation in class discussions is highly valued.

The following required books can be purchased as the Brandeis University Bookstore:

Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars.*
Rethinking the Just War Tradition, eds, M. Brough, J. Lango, and H. van der Linden.
The Morality of War, eds, L. May, E. Rovie, and S. Viner.

The remaining articles for the course, i.e., those not found in the above volumes, are in a coursepack (CP) to be purchased in class.

Note: If you are a student with a disability on record at Brandeis and would like to be accommodated in the class, please contact me early in the semester.

Course Readings
Note: The course follows the readings closely. So please read the following selections by the dates cited.

Jan. 20: Introduction


Michael Walzer, “WWII: Why Was This War Different?” (CP).

Feb. 1: Michael Walzer, “Self-Defense”, in The Morality of War, eds. May, Rovie and Viner, pp. 250-260. (Note: If you have a different edition, the pages might be slightly different from those cited here.)


Paul Woodruff, “Justification or Excuse: Saving Soldiers at the Expense of Civilians” in The Morality of War, pp. 280-291.


Feb. 8: Jeff McMahan, “Chapter 9: Preventative War and the Killing of the Innocent” (CP).

Feb. 10: P. Laberge, “Humanitarian Intervention: Three Ethical Positions” (CP).


Michael Walzer, “Chapter 11/Guerrilla War” in Just and Unjust Wars.

March 10: Michael Walzer, “Chapter 8/ War’s Means” and “Chapter 9/Noncombatant Immunity and Military Necessity” in Just and Unjust Wars.

March 12: FIRST PAPERS DUE. (This is a Friday. Please put your papers in the Phil. 118 Box in the Philosophy Department Office.)


March 17: Thomas Nagel, “War and Massacre” in War and Moral Responsibility, eds,


Henry Shue, “Torture” (CP).

April 7: Michael Walzer, “Chapter 12/Terrorism” in Just and Unjust Wars.


April 14: David Rodin, “The Ethics of Asymmetric War”.


May 3: C. Felice, “Pacifism: A Philosophical Exploration” (CP).

May 5: Jan Narveson, “Pacifism: A Philosophical Analysis” (CP).

2ND PAPERS DUE MAY 7th.