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Analyzing the Just War Frame

Defining the just war frame

At the simplest and most fundamental level, the importance I attribute to the just war frame is due to the unconscious appeal of the just war tradition within the Western liberal imagination. There is no comparable logic and set of ideas available to those in positions of authority in Western liberal societies who wish to forge a shared understanding of the conditions making a resort to war legitimate, the actors or conditions making that resort to war necessary, why it is the best course of action, and ultimately why all members of the society in question should support the decision (Kennedy, 2006). Indeed, the extent to which American decision-makers, opinion-leaders, and the public at-large automatically and reflexively draw upon the language and logic of the just war as a heuristic device when war enters the realm of the possible is striking, and speaks to this point (Hudson, 2009).

Frame function

What explains the broad and enduring resonance and appeal of a seemingly antiquated construct such as the ‘just war’ within contemporary American society, such that it can be translated into a palatable frame affixed to such a controversial and high-stakes decision? The answer to this question resides in the Aristotlean notion of *praxis* and its importance to the concept of natural philosophy, an endeavor pursued by Aristotle in seeking answers to timeless concerns including (at least in a rudimentary sense) the defining conditions of a ‘just war’ (Hamburger, 1951). In a philosophical departure from his mentor Plato, Aristotle contended that universal concepts such as justice could be divined in the particular (e.g., within the defined parameters of
phenomenological ‘forms’ such as the social practice of war) rather than remaining ethereal. As Aristotle himself notes in *The Nicomachean Ethics*,

...the branch of philosophy on which we are at present engaged is not, like the others, theoretical in its aim—because we are studying not to know what goodness is, but how to become good men, since otherwise it would be useless—we must apply our minds to the problem of how our actions should be performed, because, as we have just said, it is these that actually determine our dispositions (Aristotle, tr. by Ostwald, 1962: II, ii).

Undoubtedly, the timeless debate concerning the legitimate basis for war that resides at the heart of the just war tradition has always been, and remains, a practical question of (and for) applied ethics as much as or more than an abstract question of metaphysical origin. If for no other reason, the material costs and consequences of war force the questions surrounding war and its legitimacy from the immaterial (metaphysical) to the material (empirical) realm. Given the central focus of the just war tradition on these material and empirical considerations, it would seem as if the conversation at the heart of that tradition as well as the theoretical construct of the ‘just war’ that it seeks to define is are, and have always been, endeavors in applied rather than theoretical morality.

It is this very characteristic that facilitates the nexus between the just war ‘conversation’ and war in American foreign policy discourse (Burke, 2004). In light of its basis in applied ethics and morality, the just war tradition possesses and retains a currency relative to the social practice of war that is quite unlike other philosophical positions concerning war and the war-decision. Because it features a specific representation of the war-decision that stems from and reflects an attempt to render that decision virtuous, the construct of the just war has both utility and appeal within that context. Indeed, what is unique about the representation of the war-decision advanced and sustained by the just war tradition within the narrative clamor surrounding war is the degree to which it is *singularly* concerned with specifying the conditions that make the resort to war permissible, legitimate, even virtuous.

**Frame components**

At its core, the just war tradition is concerned with the very same dilemma as the decision-makers who draw upon it to frame the war-decision—defining the conditions that make war legitimate and accept-