

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Heartfelt truths: Towards an existentialist ethics of war

Cian O’Driscoll* 

Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, ANU College of Asia & the Pacific, Canberra, Australia

*Corresponding author. Email: Cian.odriscoll@anu.edu.au

(Received 29 November 2011; revised 8 July 2022; accepted 25 September 2022)

Abstract

Just war theory appears ever more alienated from the practice it ostensibly regulates, warfare. An increasingly abstract and esoteric discourse, it can seem very remote from the mud-and-blood actualities of warfare. This is reflective of a broader disconnect between the study of, on the one hand, the ethics of war, and, on the other, the lived experience of war. Seeking to address this problem, this article asks: *How can we recentre just war thinking as a ‘lived’ theory?* It proposes that we can reconnect just war theory to the lived experience of warfare by restoring its historical dialogue with existentialism. It develops this position by reading just war theory through the prism of Albert Camus’s writings on political violence. It concludes that Camus’s political thoughts provides a set of signposts for the development of a mode of just war theorising that places that the lived experience of warfare at the heart of our ethical thinking about war.

Keywords: Existentialism; Just War Theory; Camus; Experience of War; Augustine

We used to wonder where war lived, what it was that made it so vile. And now we realise that we know where it lives, that it is inside ourselves.

Albert Camus¹

Introduction

What is the relation between existentialism and International Relations (IR)? To what degree is IR prefigured by existentialist concerns? Is this for good or ill? And what creative purposes might IR scholars pursue via an engagement with existentialism? These are the questions that this Special Issue tackles. The task of this article is to extend these questions to normative IR theory, and specifically to the ethics of war. It takes as its point of departure a simple line of inquiry: What has existentialism got to do with the just war tradition? This question might appear daft at first glance. On the face of it, existentialism and the just war tradition come from very different places, speak about very different things, and in very different ways. Corroborating this, one will search in vain for any scholarly account of how these traditions of political thought are related to one another. Surely, then, the reasoning goes, they have nothing to do with one another. This is wrong, however. As this article will demonstrate, existentialism and the just war tradition have a relationship that, though now lapsed, was once significant. Building on this, it will argue that understanding this relationship is the key to accounting for, and perhaps also remedying, what might be considered the most problematic aspect of contemporary just war theorising, namely its disconnection from the lived experience of warfare.

¹Albert Camus, *Notebooks, 1935–42*, trans. by Philip Thody (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 1963), p. 141.

The argument will unfold over three sections. Section 1 will excavate the historical association between existentialism and the just war tradition. It will discuss, not only the centrality of questions of the ethics of political violence to the development of existentialist thought, but also the *avant la lettre* presence of existentialist commitments in the writings of Saint Augustine, the so-called father of just war thought. Jumping forward to the present day, section 2 will detail how contemporary just war theory has turned its back on the existentialist elements of its Augustinian patrimony. Instead of connecting the ethics of war to the domain of existential truth, it inclines towards the presumption of *sub specie aeternitas*. It further contends that this has had the negative effect of severing just war theorising from the practice it ostensibly regulates, warfare. Finally, section 3 will consider the possibility that this development might be arrested by a judicious (re-)engagement with existentialist thought. It will invite the reader to envision what a just war theory that starts, not with Augustine, but with his fellow-Algerian, Albert Camus, would look like.² Bringing all of this together, this article will conclude with a call for the revival of an existentialist approach to just war theorising on the grounds that this would help us to both recentre just war thinking as a lived theory and reconnect scholarly accounts of the ethics of war to the actual experience of war.

There is much at stake here. The argument for reviving an existentialist approach to the ethics of war is not merely an intellectual one, it also reflects practical concerns. If we want just war theory to connect in a meaningful way with the actual world of finite lives, we must address it to them.³ The wager here, then, is that existentialist thought can be creatively mined in the service of developing – or, if one prefers, resurrecting – an ethics of war that is rooted in rather than alienated from the subjective experience of war.

Establishing the truth

Are just war theorists up to their necks, as the title of this Special Issue would have it, in existentialist thought? The answer to this question is a definitive *No*. Contemporary just war thinking is not prefigured by existentialist concerns in any discernible way – and this, as I will argue later, is to its detriment. There is, however, evidence of a faint but potent historical mutuality between these putatively divergent traditions of political thought.

On the one hand, questions bearing on the ethics of political violence have been pivotal to the development of existentialist thought.⁴ Indicative of this, the occasion for Jean Paul Sartre's most strident articulation of the existentialist ethos was the visit of a former pupil who sought his erstwhile teacher's advice on whether he would be justified in taking up arms for the French Resistance against the German army. 'I had but one reply to make', Sartre writes. 'You are free, therefore choose – that is to say, invent. No rule of general morality can show you what you ought to do: no signs are vouchsafed in this world.'⁵ Albert Camus, as we shall see, regarded himself as an apostle of Saint Augustine and was preoccupied throughout his writing career with questions pertaining to the use of force for political ends. The Nazi occupation of France informed his thinking on these matters. 'There is nothing less excusable than war ... but once war has come, it is both cowardly and useless to try to stand to one side under the pretext that one is not responsible', he wrote in a characteristic diary entry from September 1939. 'This is why I must try to serve. ... I am in the midst of the war and have the right to judge it. To judge it, and to act.'⁶ Similarly, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* can be

²I use the term 'Algerian' loosely here, to note that both men hailed from the same part of the world.

³This claim paraphrases William James: William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York, NY: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1922), p. 20.

⁴The place of the nuclear bomb in existentialist thought is tackled elsewhere in this Special Issue.

⁵Jean Paul Sartre, 'Existentialism is a humanism', in Walter Kaufmann (ed.), *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York, NY: Plume, 1975), p. 356.

⁶Camus, *Notebooks, 1935–42*, pp. 143–4.

read as an extended meditation on the legitimacy of political violence in the aftermath of the Second World War and all the horror it entailed.⁷ It has been interpreted by some as developing an ethics of war that is consonant with just war theory.⁸ Questions bearing on the ethics of political violence were also prominent in key works by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Frantz Fanon, though few would find affinities with just war thinking in these particular texts.⁹

On the other hand, and more significantly, what would later come to be regarded as existentialist concerns can be detected in the *ur*-texts of the just war tradition, the writings of Saint Augustine. Augustine's reflections on the ethics of war were anchored in an account of the human condition, which emphasised inwardness and prioritised 'the eye of inner faith' over objective externalities.¹⁰ His attentiveness to interiority, by which I mean matters relating to will, conscience, faith, and fidelity, would subsequently influence Søren Kierkegaard, Hans Jonas, and of course Hannah Arendt, as well as the aforementioned Camus. As a minister of faith, he understood truth as something to be lived rather than merely deduced. It is for good reason, then, that Augustine is sometimes hailed as the first existentialist.¹¹ If, however, Augustine construed the task of thinking ethically about war as an extension of his concern for the self, this mode of just war thought would soon be marginalised. By the time Thomas Aquinas composed his *Summa Theologiae*, just war thinking had become a theojuristic theory of the morality of war, rather than a moral code for living with war. The subsequent writings of Francisco Vitoria, Francisco Suarez, Hugo Grotius, Samuel von Pufendorf, and Emer de Vattel affirmed this trend. The approach to just war thinking intimated in Augustine's injunction to 'love and do what you will' would henceforth be a thing of the past.¹²

What was unique about Augustine's just war thought was its affinity with the domain of what Søren Kierkegaard would later label 'existential' truth. Existential truth is most easily understood in contradistinction to objective truth. Objective truth is impersonal, universal, and verifiable by proofs and theorems. It is typically attained by bracketing the corporeal aspects of one's being, abstracting from what is particular about one's circumstances, and affecting to pursue one's inquiries from a detached viewpoint. Objective truth, one might say, is the mode of knowledge that is generated by scientific inquiry. There is no room for subjectivity within this framework: what matters is neither who advances a proposition, nor the spirit in which they do so, but what the contents of that proposition are, and whether they can be corroborated by logical and/or empirical proofs.¹³ In sharp contrast to this, existential truths are indexed to inwardness. They tell us nothing about the content of a proposition or the coherence of a philosophical proof, but everything about the sincerity of our convictions and the force of our commitment to them. Akin to a declaration of love or profession of loyalty, they can never be verified or proven, only witnessed. They designate the earnestness of our beliefs, the passion of our devotions, and the power of our faith. These are not, then, the kinds of truths that can be established by equations. They are the truths enshrined in how we choose to live our lives.¹⁴ As

⁷Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1997).

⁸Debra B. Bergofen, 'The just war tradition: Translating the ethics of human dignity into political practices', *Hypatia*, 23:2 (2008), pp. 72–94. For a different interpretation, see Kimberly Hutchings, 'Simone de Beauvoir and the ambiguous ethics of political violence', *Hypatia*, 22:3 (2007), pp. 111–32.

⁹Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969); Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1963).

¹⁰Bernard Murchland, *The Arrow that Flies by Day: Existentialist Images of the Human Condition from Socrates to Hannah Arendt* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008), p. 37.

¹¹See, for example, James K. A. Smith, *On the Road with Saint Augustine: A Real-World Spirituality for Restless Hearts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2019).

¹²Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of Saint John*, ed. by Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2012). With thanks to Liane Hartnett for drawing my attention to this important point.

¹³Robert C. Solomon, *From Rationalism to Existentialism: The Existentialists and their 19th Century Backgrounds* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1972), pp. 71–2.

¹⁴Kierkegaard, a fervent admirer of Augustine, captures the gist of this idea nicely: 'The crucial thing is to find a truth that is true for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die.' Søren Kierkegaard, 'Early journal entries', in Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (eds), *The Essential Kierkegaard* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 10.

such, they bear less upon *what* a person knows about the truth than on *how* they relate to, and indeed manifest, that truth in their thoughts and deeds.¹⁵

How does Augustine's attendance to the domain of existential truth inflect his just war thought? Despite the seminal role he played in the development of just war thinking, he never presented a formal programmatic account of his theory of just war.¹⁶ This was neither an accident nor an oversight. It was a function of the convergence of his spiritual and intellectual commitments. Wary of 'the pridefulness of philosophy', and suspicious of the presumption that questions of conscience are tractable to rational inquiry, he demurred from any attempts to systematise his thinking on the ethics of war.¹⁷ What he offered instead was, in Jean Bethke Elshtain's words, a 'negation of positive philosophy', characterised by a 'scrupulous attunement to the here and now with its very real limits'.¹⁸ What Elshtain is suggesting here, I think, is that it was never Augustine's intention to formulate an objective theory of the morality of war predicated upon some intimation of the Cartesian individual. Rather, what he had to say about war was always addressed both to and from the finite perspective of the quotidian self.¹⁹ It spoke to the existential concerns of the flesh-and-blood everyday people that he, as a man of the cloth, wished to reach. This is just war theory as homily; that is to say, just war theory for spiritual edification rather than doctrinal instruction.²⁰ This is just war theory in a subjective key. More provocatively, it is just war theory as an existentialism.

Shunning the truth

If the first casualty of war is sometimes said to be the truth, the most notable casualty of contemporary just war theory may well be existential truth. As alluded to earlier, though a defining feature of Augustine's just war thought, it appears to have been phased out of the picture by the time of Aquinas, and it was certainly absent from the early modern writings of Vitoria, Grotius, Pufendorf, et al. Jumping forward to the present day, or near enough to it, the purpose of this section is to consider whether any trace of concern for existential truth can be discerned in contemporary just war theory. The argument I intend to present is that the domain of existential truth has been almost entirely excised from the three primary schools of thought that constitute contemporary just war theory – with deleterious consequences.

The first school, the traditional approach, supposes that thinking ethically about war necessarily involves thinking historically about ethics. There are many exponents of this approach – among them, John Kelsay, Gregory Reichberg, and Valerie Morkevicius – but James Turner Johnson has arguably done more than anyone else to flesh it out.²¹ As he frames it, just war

¹⁵Once again, Kierkegaard frames the concept: 'When the question about truth is asked objectively, truth is reflected upon objectively as an object to which the knower relates himself. What is reflected upon is not the relation but that what he relates himself to is the truth ... If only that to which he relates himself to is the truth ... then the subject is in the truth. When the question about truth is asked subjectively, the individual's relation is reflected upon subjectively. If only the how of this relation is in truth, the individual is in truth, even if he in this way were to relate himself to untruth.' Søren Kierkegaard, 'Concluding unscientific postscript', in Hong and Hong (eds), *The Essential Kierkegaard*, p. 206.

¹⁶Augustine is credited with the authorship of 113 tracts, 300 letters, and approximately 8,000 sermons. What he had to say about just war is scattered across these various texts. See R. W. Dyson, *Normative Theories of Society and Government in Five Medieval Thinkers* (Lampeter, UK: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), p. 7.

¹⁷Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Augustine and the Limits of Politics* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. 50.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹⁹Consider, for example, Augustine's famous statement that what is evil in war is not the fact that some people will be killed who would die anyway, but the desire for harming, the thirst for revenge, and the lust for dominating that it ignites in the breast of man. Augustine, 'Against Faustus the Manichean [XXII.74]', in Gregory M. Reichberg, Henrik Syse, and Endre Begby (eds), *The Ethics of War: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2006), p. 73.

²⁰This comports with the fact that the Augustine who wrote *The City of God against the Pagans* was of course the same person who wrote the *Confessions*. Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. by R. W. Dyson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by Henry Chadwick (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998).

²¹Nahed Artoul Zehr, 'James Turner Johnson', in Daniel R. Brunstetter and Cian O'Driscoll (eds), *Just War Thinkers: From Cicero to the 21st Century* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2018), p. 227.

theorising is not usefully approached as an exercise in theory building from first principles, *a la* John Rawls, but as an engagement with the deeper historical tradition from which this theorising derives and in which it partakes. This tradition, the roots of which can be traced all the way back to the Roman republic, reflects 'a fund of practical wisdom, based not on abstract speculation or theorisation, but in reflection on actual problems encountered in war as these have presented themselves in different historical circumstances.'²²

Engaging with tradition, then, entails familiarising oneself with its origins and evolution, entering into a continuing dialogue with the writings of the thinkers who shaped it, extrapolating action-guiding principles from it, and extending its insights to address contemporary challenges.²³ Work that adheres to this template has been known to dismay the uninitiated, who naturally want to know what the dusty texts of dead white males, such as Aquinas and Grotius, have to do with the task of just war theorising today.²⁴ For Johnson and those who follow him, it is vital. An awareness of past just war theorising, they posit, is a prerequisite to just war theorising in the present.

To the degree that it appears in the frame at all, existential truth features in the story told by proponents of the traditional approach as a relic of an old way of just war thinking that has been left behind rather than carried forward into the present. The just war tradition, on their view, is best understood, not in terms of the singular moment of its historical creation, but in respect of its continuing evolution through time.²⁵ As such, the fact that Augustine's originary account of just war is imbued with an existential dimension is not as significant as we might first imagine. The more important fact is that the tradition has evolved in such a way that the mode of existential truth to which Augustine was so committed has subsequently been whittled out. Consequently, so far as existential truth appears in the narratives produced by Johnson et al., it is presented neither as a going concern, nor as a sacred legacy to be preserved, but as an historical curio that was present in early just war thinking but is now moribund.²⁶

The second school of contemporary just war theory follows the template established by Michael Walzer, which he set out in his classic 1977 work, *Just and Unjust Wars*. Wary of the problems inherent in the traditional approach, especially its proclivity to antiquarianism, Walzer preferred to develop a different way of doing just war theorising. Where the traditional approach can be associated with a form of historical excavation, Walzer's mode of working is best described in relation to the 'path of interpretation'.²⁷ Interpretation involves a commitment to working with and through the laws, norms, and values that we encounter, not in some textual canon, but in the world around us today. This means that the starting point for ethical analysis is not the history of political thought but the moral world as we find it, here and now. 'There is no other starting point for moral speculation', Walzer writes, 'we have to start from where we are.'²⁸ Where just war theory is concerned, this involves locating the salient normative principles embedded in contemporary international society, so that we might elucidate and reinforce them. Thus framed, *Just and Unjust Wars* equates the vocation of the just war theorist with

²²James Turner Johnson, *Can Modern War Be Just?* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 15

²³James Turner Johnson, *The War to Oust Saddam Hussein: Just War and the New Face of Conflict* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), p. 35.

²⁴Andrew Fiala, for example, describes it as a dangerous form of 'nostalgia'. Andrew Fiala, *The Just War Myth: The Moral Illusions of War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), p. 41.

²⁵See, for example, Johnson's analysis of the role that the transmission and use of Augustine's just war writings, rather than the writings themselves, played in the development of the just war tradition. James Turner Johnson, 'St Augustine', in Brunstetter and O'Driscoll (eds), *Just War Thinkers: From Cicero to the 21st Century*, p. 22.

²⁶A notable exception here is: Valerie Morkevicius, 'Looking inward together: Just war thinking and our shared moral emotions', *Ethics & International Affairs*, 31:4 (2017), pp. 441–51.

²⁷Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 20.

²⁸Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (5th edn, New York: Basic Books, 2015), p. xxvii.

the task of identifying, distilling, and codifying the ethical principles that underpin contemporary efforts to regulate war.

Walzer is forthright that this way of approaching just war theory is designed to align with the real-world experience of warfare, especially as it bears on the men and women who get caught up in the fighting. He is concerned, he tells us, is with how everyday people, rather than detached elite experts (for example, lawyers and philosophers), think about war. In his own words: 'The lawyers have constructed a paper world which fails at crucial times to correspond to the world the rest of us still live in. ... I want to account for the ways in which men and women who are not lawyers but simple citizens (and sometimes soldiers) argue about war.'²⁹ And elsewhere: 'I treat words like aggression, neutrality, surrender, civilian, reprisal, and so on, as if they were terms in a moral vocabulary – which they are, and always have been, though most recently their analysis and refinement have almost entirely been the work of lawyers.'³⁰ Contra philosophers: 'War especially imposes an urgency that is probably incompatible with philosophy as a serious enterprise. The philosopher is like Wordsworth's poet who reflects in tranquillity upon past experience (or other people's experience), thinking about political and moral choices already made.'³¹ This apparent negativity towards lawyers and philosophers is explained by Walzer's commitment to connecting theory to 'the immediacies of political and moral controversy' and to furnishing 'help to men and women faced with hard choices'.³²

Walzer's emphasis on 'experience' could be construed as bringing us close to the category of existential truth. It does not, however, go all the way. The concept of experience is typically understood as a compound of two senses. On the one hand, experience comprises 'knowledge gathered from past events, whether by conscious observation or by consideration and reflection.'³³ This account of experience evokes the Burkean notion of the lessons of the past. On the other hand, experience can also be understood in the mode of T. S. Eliott as 'a particular kind of consciousness which can, in some contexts, be distinguished from reason or knowledge.'³⁴ This account of experience resonates with the idea of 'subjective witness'.³⁵ Walzer's just war theorising opens up to only the first construal of experience; it bypasses the second entirely. Existential truth is absent from Walzer's just war theory.

The third school of contemporary just war theory is animated by what is often called the revisionist turn. A post-9/11 phenomenon, revisionist approaches to just war theory have gone in the course of two decades from being a philosophical obscurity to the largest growth area in the ethics of war. The work of Jeff McMahan has been pivotal to its success, but other scholars, including Cecile Fabre, David Rodin, Seth Lazar, and Helen Frowe, have also made significant contributions.³⁶ What binds these scholars together is a readiness to contest the core tenets of Walzer's orthodoxy.³⁷ The details of their arguments need not detain us here, however. What is of interest is *how* these revisionists go about their business.

Where traditionalists like Johnson presumes that ethical analysis is best addressed via tradition, and Walzer and his followers start from a commitment to studying the world as they find it, the

²⁹Ibid., p. xxv.

³⁰Ibid., p. xxvi.

³¹Ibid., p. xxiii.

³²Ibid., p. xxvii.

³³Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (new edn, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 83–4.

³⁴Ibid., pp. 83–4.

³⁵Ibid., p. 85.

³⁶For a primer, see Seth Lazar and Helen Frowe (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Ethics of War* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018).

³⁷Specifically, they contest the relation Walzer assumes between just cause for war and collective liability to armed attack, the doctrine of the moral equality of combatants that goes with it, and the principle of non-combatant immunity that he champions. For more detail, see Jeff McMahan, 'Just war', in Robert E. Goodin, Philip Pettit, and Thomas Pogge (eds), *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2017), ch. 37.

revisionist enterprise is a more rationalist endeavour. Dismissive of the view that sound ethical principles can be derived from either the sacred texts of the just war tradition or the normative architecture of international society, those who tread the revisionist path suppose that theories which grant us insight into the 'deep morality of war' can be constructed from first principles in a Kantian style.³⁸ The aspiration is clear: the generation of an objective general theory of the morality of war. Detachment, abstraction, universalism, the presumption of a so-called god's eye view, and the liberal use of thought experiments are the main techniques involved, analytical rigour and argumentative precision the watchwords. In a nutshell, this is just war theory in the mode of Anglo-American analytical moral philosophy. This vision is not without its appeal. It holds out the promise of transcending the limitations of our particular viewpoint and acquiring a less tendentious, and therefore (ostensibly) truer, account of the world as it is.³⁹ This can only be achieved, the logic runs, by leaving behind, and even excising, the subjective starting-point that claims to objectivity are intended to usurp.⁴⁰ This, then, is the attraction of the revisionist approach.

There is, of course, no scope for existential truth in this schema. It is actively prescinded.⁴¹ The result is precisely the kind of abstract thinking that Kierkegaard warned against: 'thinking where there is no thinker.'⁴² The fact that the revisionist approach, thus configured, has risen to a position of dominance in the field is indicative of the turn away from existential truth in just war theory more generally. Indeed, and as we have already seen, contemporary just war theorists of all stripes – traditionalists, Walzerians, and revisionists – have displayed negligible interest in connecting their theorising to the subjective domain. The net result of this is that existential truth is in abeyance in present-day just war theorising.

The disappearance of existential truth from the scene may seem like a minor matter, something for scholars to quibble over, but otherwise of no great import. This is not the case. It has contributed to the propagation of a just war discourse that is blind to its own subjective dimension. Paraphrasing Sandra Harding, just war theory is never 'impartial, disinterested, value-neutral, Archimedean'.⁴³ Instead, it is always and necessarily 'socially situated'.⁴⁴ To pretend otherwise is to indulge in the 'God trick', by which is meant the pretence that knowledge is the product of a transcendent movement from the here and now to a universalistic truth.⁴⁵ Accordingly, what is passed off in contemporary just war thought as an 'objective' theory of the ethics of war is not actually so objective after all. It is neither a pre-reflective starting point for knowledge claims, nor a transcendental view from nowhere, but the product of a set of practices (for example, detachment, abstraction) based on freighted Cartesian assumptions that reduce everything to bland hypotheticals and bloodless generalities. Evolved in this way, just war theory has come to privilege the universal and the abstract over the concrete and the particular.⁴⁶ This has led to the evacuation of the human element from just war thought. As Rosemary

³⁸See Jeff McMahan, 'The ethics of killing in war', *Ethics*, 114:4 (2004), pp. 693–733.

³⁹Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 5.

⁴⁰Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 15.

⁴¹Bertrand Russell's sketch of this form of theoretical activity is disclosive: 'The free intellect will see as God might see, without a here and now, without hopes and fears, without the trammels of customary beliefs and traditional prejudices, calmly, dispassionately, in the sole and exclusive desire of knowledge.' Quoted in Antony Rudd, *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 28.

⁴²Kierkegaard, 'Concluding unscientific postscript', p. 220.

⁴³Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 11.

⁴⁴Sandra Harding, 'Rethinking standpoint epistemology: What is strong objectivity?', *The Centennial Review*, 36:3 (1992), p. 444.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 445.

⁴⁶Lucinda J. Peach, 'An alternative to pacifism? Feminism and just war theory', *Hypatia*, 9:2 (1994), p. 158.

Kellison observes, 'It is possible to read whole books on the ethics of war without ever getting a sense of the real people whose lives are impacted by the violence of war.'⁴⁷

The disconnection of just war theory from the subjective experience of warfare has real world consequences. It curtails the action-guiding potential of just war theory, that is, its capacity to guide the conduct of agents of violence. If just war theory does not speak to the gut of those who are expected to live, die, and kill by its edicts, but is instead dismissed by them as a cerebral parlour game, it will not bind their conduct.⁴⁸ Indeed, soldiers are on record dismissing the ethical frameworks that regulate war fighting as 'nonsense' drafted by 'pen-pushers who have "no appreciation of the realities" of combat.'⁴⁹ To cite an ongoing case, Soldier A, a member of the Australian Defence Force who currently stands accused of committing war crimes in Afghanistan, has discounted the laws of war as appropriate, not for the grim actuality of combat, but only for a make-believe world of 'rainbows and unicorns and little flying bunnies.'⁵⁰ The lesson to draw from this is that the people who are subject to just war theory are not denizens of the type of hypothetical timeless nowhere, and should not be addressed as such. If we want just war theory to connect in a meaningful way with the actual world of real flesh-and-blood people, we must ensure that it speaks to them on an existential level.

Reclaiming the truth

Finally, then, we arrive at the crux of the matter. Might we correct the anaemic character of contemporary just war theory by, as it were, reconnecting it to existentialist thought? This is the possibility I wish to explore in this section. The activity proposed is not so much an act of recovery, however, as a creative encounter: a sketch of what we get when we put just war theory and existentialism in conversation with one another anew. I say 'anew' because there will be no attempt here to turn the clock back to the time of Augustine. One cannot, after all, jump into the same river twice. What I propose to do instead is consider what a just war theory that starts, not with Augustine, but Albert Camus, would look like.⁵¹ Camus did not merely hail from the same part of the world as Augustine, he also felt a strong affinity with him, and even wrote his dissertation upon Augustine's relation to Neoplatonism. He has even been hailed by some scholars as a second Augustine – a billing his ego would surely have appreciated.⁵² The argument, as we shall see, is that it would open up a vista onto a way of thinking about just war theory as a form of existential ethics that is both old and new at the same time.

A new Augustine

Albert Camus (1913–60) is one of the most revered French thinkers of the twentieth century and a giant of the existentialist world.⁵³ A gifted writer, he produced prose of rare beauty, as well as complex (if somewhat jumbled) philosophical tracts and arresting drama. He spoke to the events

⁴⁷Rosemary Kellison, *Expanding Responsibility for the Just War: A Feminist Critique* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 1.

⁴⁸This claim riffs on Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (London, UK: Fourth Estate, 1990), p. 75.

⁴⁹Quoted in Joanna Bourke, 'Pugnacity, pain, and professionalism: British combat memoirs from Afghanistan, 2006–14', in Philip Dwyer (ed.), *War Stories: The War Memoir in History and Literature* (New York, NY: Bergahn, 2018), pp. 286–7.

⁵⁰Quoted in Mark Willacy, *Rogue Forces: An Explosive Insiders' Account of Australian SAS War Crimes in Afghanistan* (Sydney, Aus.: Simon & Schuster, 2021), p. 275.

⁵¹The idea of rereading just war theory through the prism of Camus's writings on the absurd builds on the groundbreaking work of Liane Hartnett. In particular, see Liane Hartnett, 'Love in a Time of Empire: An Engagement with the Political Thought of Tolstoy, Tagore, and Camus' (PhD thesis, London School of Economics, UK), available at: {<http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/3889/>}. It also draws on Liane Hartnett and Cian O'Driscoll, 'Sad and laughable and strange: At war with just war', *Global Society*, 35:1 (2021), pp. 27–44.

⁵²Jean Elshtain often treats Camus in conjunction with Augustine. Elshtain, *Augustine and the Limits of Politics*, p. 6.

⁵³Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the 20th Century* (London, UK: Peter Halban, 1989), pp. 136–8.

of the day and engaged politics in an activist manner. Hailed as the great *moraliste* of the postwar era, he was widely celebrated, not least by the awarding committee for the Nobel Prize for Literature, for his public commitment and private passion.⁵⁴ Yet he had a vexed relationship with existentialism. He refuted the label, feuded bitterly with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, and has subsequently been written out of the history of existentialism by commentators such as David Cooper.⁵⁵ Even so, Camus had a lot in common with the wider existentialist movement: he shared with Sartre et al. both 'the conviction that philosophical ideas must be approached from a concrete, human, existential standpoint' and a commitment to 'face a world in which transcendent absolutes could no longer be appealed to or relied upon'.⁵⁶ It is reasonable, then, to treat him, if not as an existentialist philosopher, at least as part of the wider movement of existentialist thought. This is congruent with how his books and writings have been received down the years.

Interestingly, and as briefly noted earlier, while Camus did not much care for the existentialist scene, he felt a profound intellectual affinity with Saint Augustine.⁵⁷ He wrote his thesis on Augustine, identified with his belief that tragedy and joy co-exist in life, and even confided to an audience of Dominican priests in December 1946 that 'I am your Augustine before his conversion. I am debating the problem but not getting past it.'⁵⁸ Like Augustine, Camus was not a philosopher in any strict sense of the term, but a thinker and writer with wide-ranging set of interests, foremost among which was political violence. As Colin Davis has observed, 'the question of violence is at the heart of Camus's writings and his ethical deliberations. He was constantly perplexed by the question of whether or not violence could be justified and what ends it could legitimately serve.'⁵⁹ Camus stated this concern directly in *Neither Victims Nor Executioners*: 'Before we can build anything, we need to ask two questions: "Yes or no, directly or indirectly, do you want to be killed or assaulted? Yes or no, directly or indirectly, do you want to kill or assault?"'⁶⁰ He returned to it in *The Rebel*: 'We shall be capable of nothing until we know whether we have the right to kill our fellow men, or the right to let them be killed.'⁶¹ This fascination with the question of what people are willing to die and kill for was enlivened by personal experience.⁶² In addition to experiencing the horror of violent political struggle in Algeria, Camus suffered through the German occupation of France in the Second World War and even served in the resistance movement – though not in a combat role.⁶³ This experience, and the massive breakdown of meaning that it represented for Camus, informed his life's work, and is explored (albeit indirectly) in his novels, plays, journalism, and philosophical writings.⁶⁴

⁵⁴Stephen Eric Bronner, *Camus: Portrait of a Moraliste* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. ix.

⁵⁵Olivier Todd, *Albert Camus: A Life*, trans. by Benjamin Ivry (New York, NY: Carroll & Graf, 1997), p. 379. Cooper dismisses Camus's credentials as an existentialist philosopher on the grounds that he was 'neither a philosopher nor systematic'. David E. Cooper, *Existentialism: A Reconstruction* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1999), p. 9.

⁵⁶John Cruickshank, 'Introduction', in Albert Camus, *Caligula and Other Plays*, trans. by Stuart Gilbert (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 20. See also Robert C. Solomon, *Dark Feelings, Grim Thoughts: Experience and Reflection in Camus and Sartre* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 5–9.

⁵⁷Patrick McCarthy, *Camus: A Critical Study of His Life and Work* (London, UK: Hamish Hamilton, 1982), p. 73.

⁵⁸Todd, *Albert Camus*, pp. 43–4, 230.

⁵⁹Colin Davis, 'Violence and ethics in Camus', in Edward J. Hughes (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Camus* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 108.

⁶⁰Albert Camus, 'Neither victims nor executioners', in Jacqueline Levi-Valensi (ed.), *Camus at Combat: Writing 1944–47* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 259.

⁶¹Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. by Anthony Bower (London, UK: Penguin, 1953), p. 12.

⁶²Camus, *Notebooks, 1935–42*, pp. 125, 139, 140–4.

⁶³Todd, *Albert Camus*, p. 171.

⁶⁴Colin Davis, 'Camus' war: *L'Etranger* and *Lettres a un Ami Allemand*', in Colin Davis (ed.), *Interpreting Ethics and Trauma in 20th Century French Writing* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2018), pp. 70, 78.

Beyond absurd

Camus's deliberations on the ethics of political violence begin with the recognition of what he calls the 'absurd'. The absurd, for Camus, represents the gap between people's desire to lead meaningful lives and the futility of that quest.⁶⁵ It signifies the realisation that all our projects and commitments appear equally pointless when viewed in light of the death of God, the refusal of the world to yield to rational explanation, and the arbitrariness of our existence. Camus poetically describes it as the silence of the universe in response to the human yearning for meaning.⁶⁶ The absurd is not, it follows, something that can be escaped, transcended, or even circumvented.⁶⁷ Rather, it is the fundamental condition of our existence, and, as such, must be both admitted and confronted.⁶⁸ That we must live with the absurd is exactly the lesson that Camus seeks to impart with his retelling of the myth of Sisyphus.⁶⁹ Yet he refrains from any assertion that the absurd is all encompassing.⁷⁰ 'To observe that life is absurd cannot be an end, but only a beginning', he writes. 'What interests me is not [the absurd itself] but the consequences and rules of action we must draw from it.'⁷¹ The challenge arising from this is to find a way of living with the absurd that is not a surrender to 'everything' goes nihilism.

Indeed, it is imperative for Camus that the absurd is not interpreted as a licence to do whatsoever one pleases. The absurd, on Camus's account, is something to contend with, not succumb to. It does not create a situation wherein, because nothing matters, and consequently there is no reason to choose one set of values over another, anything goes. This was Caligula's fatal misapprehension. His belief that there are no laws binding on human conduct is revealed in his downfall, not to be the golden rule he thought it to be, but instead a dead end that converts 'philosophy into corpses'.⁷² If, by contrast, we wish to confront the absurd in the context of our own lives we will find that 'it does not authorise all actions'.⁷³ It binds, rather than liberates. It does so by encouraging us to seek meaning *in* life, rather than the meaning *of* life.⁷⁴ This orients us towards, not only a celebration of the things we love, but also a solidaristic commitment to the fellow humans with whom we share our lives. In thus setting ourselves to rebel against the empty indifference of the universe we can forge the kinds of bonds that make life worth living.⁷⁵ What this commitment might look like in practice, Camus illustrates in an open letter to an erstwhile friend who had taken the wrong side in the Second World War:

You never believed the meaning of this world, and you therefore deduced the idea that everything was equivalent and that good and evil could be denied according to one's wishes. ... You readily accepted despair and I never yielded to it. ... You saw the injustice of our condition to the point of being willing to add to it, whereas it seemed to me that man must exalt justice in order to fight against eternal injustice, create happiness in order to protest against the universe of unhappiness.⁷⁶

⁶⁵Jonathan, Webber, *Rethinking Existentialism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 24–5.

⁶⁶It is, in this sense, 'lucid reason noting its limits'. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York, NY: Vintage, 2018), p. 49.

⁶⁷Ibid., pp. 32–3, 35–9.

⁶⁸Ibid., pp. 31, 93.

⁶⁹Ibid., pp. 119–22.

⁷⁰Albert Camus, 'Pessimism and courage', in Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, trans. by Justin O'Brien (New York, NY: Vintage, 1995), p. 17.

⁷¹Camus quoted in Robert Zaretsky, *A Life Worth Living: Albert Camus and the Quest for Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 17.

⁷²Albert Camus, 'Caligula', in Camus, *Caligula and Other Plays*, p. 53.

⁷³Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 67.

⁷⁴'Understand this', Camus writes: 'We can despair of the meaning of life in general, but not of the particular forms it takes.' Camus, *Notebooks, 1935–42*, pp. 151–2.

⁷⁵Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 28.

⁷⁶Albert Camus, 'Letters to a German friend', in Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, p. 28.

The fact of absurdity does not, then, prescind the possibility of making ethical choices and living a decent life.⁷⁷ Rather, it affirms the importance of so doing.

Thus, we arrive at the heart of the matter: what code of conduct should guide us in this endeavour? Camus proposes the doctrine of revolt as a 'rule of action' for living a decent life in shadow of the absurd.⁷⁸ Revolt reflects the struggle to achieve meaning in the thrall of meaninglessness. Marrying defiance and humility, it rejects the idea that the meaninglessness of the world exempts us from seeking meaning in our own lives, while insisting that any such meaning can only ever be provisional, partial, imperfect.⁷⁹ A philosophy of limits, the doctrine of revolt stands, on the one hand, *against* the totalising character of the ends that humans are naturally disposed to pursue via force, and, on the other, *for* the imposition of absolute restraints upon the means employed in their pursuit. Addressing the hard question of what people ought to do when confronted by tyranny and oppression, it affirms that, on the one hand, human solidarity may warrant the use of force while, on the other, admitting that the use of force is corrosive of human solidarity. The effect of this is to frame the use of force as 'at one and the same time unavoidable and unjustifiable', and to thereby 'quarantine' it and render it exceptional.⁸⁰ As Camus puts it, 'There is no justice; there are only limits.'⁸¹

A morality play

Camus dramatised these ideas in his 1949 play *The Just Assassins*.⁸² It addresses the question of whether it is right to kill in pursuit of a political ideal via a fictionalised account of the 1905 assassination of the Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovitch by the young revolutionary Ivan Kaliayev in what later came to be labelled history's first act of terrorism. The action takes the form of a dialogue between Kaliayev and his associates as they plan their attack. What were their motivations? What were they hoping to achieve by killing the Grand Duke? Were they justified in taking his life? What laws would they be breaking? What laws still bound them? What cost would they pay for this action? And would they be able to make their peace with it?

The title of the play sets the action up. *Les Juste* is usually translated into English as *The Just Assassins*, but it is also sometimes rendered as *The Scrupulous Assassins*. This slippage is revealing. The word 'scrupulous' derives from the Latin term, *scrupulus*, which denotes a small and sharp stone that, when lodged in one's sandal, becomes a source of constant irritation.⁸³ When, then, Camus lauds the scrupulousness displayed by Kaliayev and his comrades, he is taking a stand against the idea that violence should ever be easy. The decision to take up arms, he wants to say, should never be taken lightly. It should always be a source of angst, regret, worry, and misgiving.⁸⁴ Where these doubts are absent, we must be worried that the persons who have armed themselves have surrendered themselves body and soul to their cause and made violence a way of life. Where these doubts are present, however, they embody the doctrine of revolt. They reflect a desire to do the right thing in the face of everything being wrong – even (and especially) in the full knowledge that there can be no vindication.

The plot reinforces this message. It depicts Kaliayev as a revolutionary beset by doubt. Acting in the name of solidarity with the oppressed, he states his willingness to kill if that is what is necessary to 'build a world where there will be no killing'.⁸⁵ Yet he is, at the same time, cognisant that what he is preparing for is nevertheless murder. Pained by this, he is insistent that his

⁷⁷ Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. by Robin Buss (London, UK: Penguin, 2002), pp. 195–7.

⁷⁸ Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 17.

⁷⁹ See Camus, *Notebooks, 1935–42*, p. 55.

⁸⁰ Zaretsky, *A Life Worth Living*, p. 156.

⁸¹ See Camus, *Notebooks, 1935–42*, p. 211.

⁸² Albert Camus, 'The just assassins', in Camus, *Caligula and Other Plays*.

⁸³ Zaretsky, *A Life Worth Living*, p. 175.

⁸⁴ See Albert Camus, 'Reflections on the guillotine', in Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, p. 175–6.

⁸⁵ Camus, 'The just assassins', p. 174.

commitment to violence is constrained: while he is prepared to kill the Grand Duke, there are other lines he will not cross. He rejects the idea that anything that serves his cause – killing children, for example – can be justified.⁸⁶ Affirming the view that ‘even destruction has a right way and a wrong way, and there are limits’, he refuses, as he puts it, ‘to add to the living injustice around me for the sake of a dead justice’.⁸⁷ In the end – spoiler alert – Kaliyev kills the Grand Duke and is executed for his crime. Sorrowful though this ending may be, there is consolation to be had in the moral lesson it imparts. Camus sees in Kaliyev the incarnation of revolt: in a world devoid of happy endings, he gave his life in protest against injustice, while never losing sight of his own ineradicable guilt.⁸⁸

What vision of just war theory do we arrive at, then, if, seeking to admit subjectivity into our ethical thinking about war, we take Camus as our inspiration and conversation-partner? It invites us, I think, to view just war theory, like the doctrine of revolt personified by Kaliyev, as a good faith attempt to grapple with (rather than circumnavigate) the grim question of how to *live with* war. A feature of, and response to, the war system, it reflects man’s valiant albeit futile effort to overcome his condition. Just war theory, on this account, is best understood, not as an objective theory of the general morality of war, but as a code for living ‘in a world in which we must choose between being a victim or an executioner – and nothing less.’⁸⁹

This position provides a counterpoint to the views developed in recent years by both critics and champions of just war theory. To the critics of just war theory, Camus concedes that the idea that war could ever be just is absurd. Yet he also offers us instruction in terms of both *how* to go on living in light of this grotesque reality, and also, more crucially, *why* we must strive to do so. To paraphrase Camus, we cannot escape from war, we are already in it up to our necks, and so the choice is to either surrender to it or exalt the ideal of justice in the face of it. He would have us choose the latter. To the champions of just war theory, Camus would remind us that any account of the ethics of war we seek to elaborate should be addressed, not to some timeless subject who observes the world from a god’s-eye view, but to particular, finite persons who see the world from their own limited perspective. The reasons for this are clear enough. A just war theory that is pitched to people who live in a universalised nowhere will not speak to people who live (and wage war) round here and about now. Reasons for action and rules of conduct must resonate with the proximate persons to whom they are addressed, or else they are susceptible to be discounted – with dismal consequences. In contrast to both of these approaches, a just war theory that takes subjectivity seriously would have the virtue of speaking to the hopes and fears of the flesh-and-blood people who are subject to it on an existential level. Camus, then, points just war theorists in a promising direction, one which would return the lived experience of war to the heart of our ethical thinking about war.

Conclusion

Poetry, as Seamus Heaney once wrote, must be true to both ‘the impact of external reality’ and ‘sensitive to the inner laws’ of what it means to be human.⁹⁰ Without wishing to draw an equivalence between poetry and the task of thinking ethically about war, I want to suggest that the same aspirations apply to just war theory. It must, in other words, not just be true to the demands of external reality, but also sensitive to the inner laws of what it means to be human. The problem essayed in this article is that contemporary just war theory has privileged the former at the expense of the latter. The result of this has been an ever more detached just war discourse

⁸⁶Camus, *Caligula and Other Plays*, p. 186.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁸⁸Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 139.

⁸⁹Camus, *Notebooks, 1942–51*, p. 109.

⁹⁰Seamus Heaney, ‘Crediting Poetry’, Nobel Lecture (7 December 1995), available at: {<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1995/heaney/lecture/>} accessed 21 April 2021.

that, focused on the elaboration of a general theory of the morality of war, no longer speaks to, or moves, the commitments of the real-life people whose lives it wagers.

This article has explored the proposition that this state of affairs might be rectified by restoring the dialogue between existentialism and just war theory. It did so by considering what just war theory would look like read through the prism of Camus's writings on violence. The argument this exercise yielded is that Camus's political thought provides a set of signposts for the development of a mode of just war theorising that, attentive to both the objective and subjective domains of truth, places the existential experience of warfare at the heart of our ethical thinking about war. Taking this road would, it follows, necessitate approaching just war thinking, not simply as a theory of the ethics of war, but also as a set of ideas to be lived in – and lived by. As Camus counselled, it is not enough to philosophise about war, one must also learn to live with it.⁹¹ This is likely to be a disquieting undertaking. It will require just war theorists to forego the disingenuous posture of intellectual disinterestedness, and instead to embrace the moral pathos that lurks behind all questions bearing on the ethics of war. This, then, I conclude, is the challenge, but also the promise, of an existentialist ethics of war, *redux*.

Acknowledgements. I wish to thank Andy Hom, Luke Glanville, Brent Steele, Xander Kirke, Ben Zala, Luke Ashworth, Maša Mrlovje, Rens van Munster, Dahlia Simangan, and Eileen Hunt for their help with the drafting of this article, which is directly inspired by Liane Hartnett's excellent work on Camus and Augustine. Dan Brunstetter, Kirsten Ainley, Kim Hutchings, Laura Sjoberg, Rhys Machold, and Valerie Morkevicius offered helpful comments on earlier versions of the argument, as did the anonymous reviewers for this journal. I am also very grateful to Lee-Ann Chae and Howard Williams for the opportunity to workshop ideas for this paper with colleagues at, respectively, Temple University and Cardiff University.

Cian O'Driscoll is a Professor of International Relations at the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, ANU. Cian has written widely about the ethics of war and the just war tradition. His most recent monograph, *Victory: The Triumph and Tragedy of Just War* was published by Oxford University Press in 2019. He has also published three co-edited volumes, a previous monograph, and articles in *International Studies Quarterly*; the *European Journal of International Relations*; the *Review of International Studies*, *Ethics & International Affairs*, and *Millennium*, among other journals.

⁹¹Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 12.