

Book Review: The Ethics of Armed Conflict: A Cosmopolitan Just War Theory by John W. Lango

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*Just war theory exists to stop armies and countries from using armed force without good cause. But how can we judge whether a war is just? In this book **John W. Lango** aims to develop a set of cosmopolitan just war principles for all forms of armed conflict, arguing that the more traditional state-centric just war theory should be both globalised and democratised. **Alexander Leveringhaus** finds some interesting insights here and recommends the book to researchers in political and moral philosophy, but finds that it lacks some elegance in prose as there is a fair amount of repetition.*

The Ethics of Armed Conflict: A Cosmopolitan Just War Theory. John W. Lango. Edinburgh University Press. January 2014.

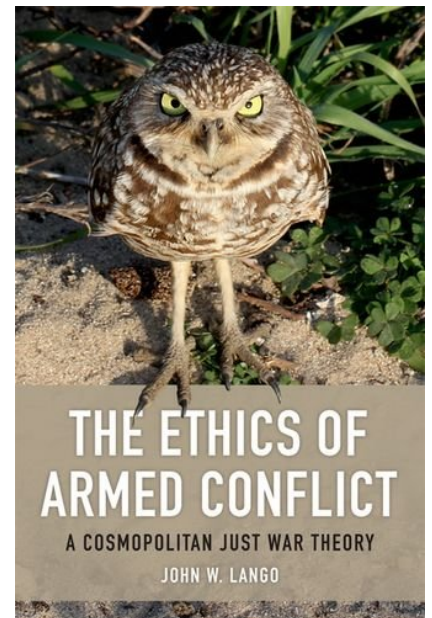
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In recent years, just war theory has witnessed a remarkable intellectual revival. Predominantly a phenomenon in English-speaking philosophical circles, contemporary just war theory has tackled many pressing issues relating to the use of armed force with increasing philosophical sophistication, drawing upon insights from other philosophical subfields, such as political theory, legal theory, and bioethics. [John W. Lango's](#) latest book is best viewed against this background.

Mirroring recent debates on global justice in political theory, contemporary just war theory can be roughly divided into non-cosmopolitan and cosmopolitan approaches. In a nutshell, the former approach attaches moral significance to communal and state boundaries, whereas the latter, upholding an ideal of world citizenship, deems borders morally irrelevant. As its title suggests, Lango's book is committed to the second perspective.

In order to develop a cosmopolitan just war theory, Lango starts with a lengthy methodological discussion. First, he seeks to strike a balance between the abstractions of moral theory and the concrete dilemmas experienced during armed conflict. He does so by employing a method akin to John Rawls' famous 'reflective equilibrium' (see [A Theory of Justice](#)). In order to reason about the ethics of war, Lango thinks one must render coherent comprehensive moral principles (e.g. autonomy), just war principles, and judgements about particular conflicts via a process of mutual adjustment. The result of this critical process, he claims, is a revisionist just war theory that challenges more traditional ideas, most notably that just war theory should be state-centric.

Secondly, like many other contemporary just war theorists (Cecile Fabre, F.M. Kamm, Jeff McMahan, and David Rodin), Lango approaches armed conflict from a deontological perspective. The rightness and wrongness of military action, he assumes, does not solely depend on its consequences. Although much of what Lango has to say about moral theory is not radically new, his discussion of deontology draws attention to an interesting yet often neglected issue. Deontological moral theories, and Kantianism in particular, emphasise the importance of an agent's intentions. To illustrate the point, terrorism, some deontologists argue, is bad precisely because terrorists intend to harm innocent individuals in order to achieve their aims. If this is true, a terrorist act potentially differs from a legitimate military strike against, say, an enemy's weapons factory in which harm is unintentionally yet foreseeable inflicted on non-combatants as a side-effect of the destruction of the factory. Lango rightly points out that there are



many instances in armed conflict in which a warring party knowingly yet unintentionally harms individuals. A drone pilot, for example, who targets a suspected terrorist in a busy market square may not intend to harm any bystanders, but he knowingly imposes the risk of death or injury on them.

In response, deontological just war theory, Lango contends, must also take into account the levels of risk warring parties may permissibly, and knowingly, impose on individuals in the course of a military campaign. Some risky operations, if conducted negligently or recklessly, may violate moral rules, even if any resulting harms are not inflicted intentionally. Lango even goes so far to claim that the mere exposure to an unreasonable level of risk at the hands of another party constitutes a form of harm, even if the risk does not, in the end, materialise. While much of what he has to say on risk deserves to be taken up in future discussion, he makes this particular argument appear less controversial than it is. A detailed defence of the relationship between 'risking' and 'harming' would have been useful.

But the action lies, of course, not in the methodological analysis alone but in Lango's discussion of cosmopolitanism. Given its deontological foundations, it is hardly surprising that Lango's cosmopolitanism is individualistic and rights-based. Military action should be understood as the defence of individual human rights. However, more needs to be said about the distinctive contribution cosmopolitanism can make here. After all, human rights are at the centre of contemporary just war theory, even in the works of non-cosmopolitan thinkers, such as Michael Walzer and John Rawls. To reply to this charge, Lango can point to the overall revisionist aspect of his project. Compared to Walzer's and Rawls', his theory is less state-centric. On the one hand, and continuing a familiar theme in cosmopolitan writing, Lango wants to strengthen and reform international institutions, especially the UN Security Council. This is a sensible argument, though one suspects that those studying International Relations might take issue with it. On the other hand, he thinks that cosmopolitan just war principles can guide the actions of all individuals, including ordinary citizens and leaders of non-state movements. In particular, individuals *qua* cosmopolitan citizens of the world should, when reasoning about the use of armed force, take into account the perspectives of non-members of their community. This seems desirable, especially because politicians are quick to denounce the enemy's goals, but the overall repercussions are not clear. Does this 'global' perspective mean that one merely understands the motives of one's enemies? Or does it mean that one's enemies may, under certain circumstances, also have a just cause, or at least some legitimate goals? The possibility that both parties may have a just cause warrants further scrutiny.

The biggest challenge that cosmopolitanism poses to just war thinking, however, lies in its assumption that boundaries do not carry moral weight. In the debate on global justice, non-cosmopolitans usually argue that there is a special relationship between compatriots, which cosmopolitans deny. Applied to just war theory, cosmopolitanism has radical repercussions, especially when lives are weighted against each other. For it suggests that communal affiliations should not have an impact on these calculations. Lango recognises this when he argues that bad and good results in armed conflict must be distributed according to a fairness standard. The notion of risk, again, is crucial here. But the book would have benefitted from an analysis of the reasons that can legitimately be given for departing from an egalitarian distribution of risk in particular, and harm more generally.

Overall, the book lacks some elegance in prose as there is a fair amount of repetition. The fact that the individual chapters are divided into many, and sometimes rather short, subparts does not make things easier for the reader. Stylistic quibbles aside, there are some interesting insights here and the book is recommended to researchers in political and moral philosophy.

Dr Alex Leveringhaus is currently a post-doctoral research fellow in the [Oxford Institute for Ethics, Law and Armed Conflict](#) at the University of Oxford, and a post-doctoral researcher in the 3TU Centre for Ethics and Technology at Delft University of Technology, Netherlands. At Oxford, he is also a James Martin Fellow in the [Oxford Martin School](#). He works on the ethical implications of new and emerging military technologies. He has worked widely with civil society organisations and government on autonomous weapons, and is the lead author of a forthcoming policy paper on military robotics for the Oxford Martin Policy Paper Series. [Read more reviews by Alex.](#)

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