

WAR AND MORALITY

Political Science 371, Winter 2025
Portland State University

[David Kinsella](#)

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Office Hours: Monday & Wednesday, 12:30-1:30, or by appointment –
in person or via [Zoom](#).

Description

When states or other human groupings abandon less primitive means of resolving their conflicts, they resort to war. Although many wars have been terribly bloody and destructive, history provides relatively few examples of wars of total annihilation. Rather, for reasons involving both self-interest and ethical conviction, political leaders and warriors have often observed limits in their resort to war and the conduct of battle. This course examines the historical, moral, and legal foundations of these limits, and their enduring relevance despite ongoing changes in world politics and the transformation of modern warfare.

Although we consider alternative perspectives, the course focuses primarily on the just war tradition, major elements of which are reflected in international law governing the legitimate resort to force and proper conduct during wartime. Topics include aggression and self-defense, genocide, humanitarian intervention, nuclear deterrence, noncombatant immunity, terrorism, treatment of prisoners, torture, and prosecution of war crimes. Discussion of these topics is informed by contemporary just war thinking as well as classical political and moral philosophy.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- *Master ethical frameworks and principles in warfare:* Students will demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the main theoretical, philosophical, and legal approaches to the ethics of warfare, drawing from international relations theory, international law, and political philosophy.
- *Analyze and evaluate case studies of ethical dilemmas in warfare:* Students will develop the ability to identify and critically examine multiple ethical issues in specific historical and contemporary conflicts. They will apply relevant moral and legal principles to assess the ethical dimensions of military actions and decisions in these cases.
- *Critique the role of ethics in shaping military policy and public discourse:* Students will evaluate

how moral considerations influence the formulation of military strategies and foreign policies. They will also assess the impact of ethical arguments on public debates surrounding war and military interventions, developing a nuanced understanding of how moral discourse shapes societal attitudes towards warfare.

Requirements and Evaluation

Course grades are based on a [midterm](#) (40%) and [final](#) exam (60%). The exams consist of both multiple-choice questions and longer essays. Attendance is expected; course grades will be adversely affected by excessive absence from class.

I hold on to students' written work for one academic term after the end of the course, so if you want to keep your final exam, please retrieve it from me no later than the end of spring term 2025.

Readings and Other Course Materials

Assigned readings come from the following book, available from the [Portland State Bookstore](#):

- David Kinsella and Craig L. Carr, editors, *The Morality of War: A Reader* (Lynne Rienner, 2007)

Other readings are available online. Unless the reading assignment includes an "online" weblink, it is available from the PSU library's electronic holdings. You must retrieve these readings (all journal articles) by logging into the PSU library website and locating and downloading the article from one of the library's full-content subscription services. Access to other copyrighted readings requires logging into D2L and clicking the "on reserve" link.

In addition to the assigned readings, students should be reading, on a regular basis, the [New York Times](#), the [Washington Post](#), or some other newspaper with thorough international coverage. Performance in the course will reflect familiarity with current international issues, and not just an understanding of lecture material and course readings.

All slides used during lectures will be made available online by the end of each week. Links to older versions of lecture slides are available at the start of the term and will be updated.

Courtesy, Conduct, and Resources

Academic dishonesty. Students are responsible for being familiar with the PSU [Code of Student Conduct and Responsibility](#), especially the section concerning academic misconduct -- that is, plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty. If you are unsure of the definition or consequences of academic misconduct, please consult with me.

Use of Generative AI tools. Using tools to check and correct your own writing (built-in spelling and grammar checkers or third-party tools like Grammarly) is different from using generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools to create content or structure in response to your prompts (like ChatGPT). In your work for this course, use of the first sort of tool is encouraged, while use of the second sort of tool is

subject to the following limitations. Using generative AI to complete written assignments, including examinations, is not permitted. However, you may use these tools to study, help conduct research, or brainstorm ideas and argument. The use generative AI tools outside these parameters qualifies as [academic misconduct](#). If you are uncertain about the allowable use of generative AI in the course, please consult with me in advance.

Discrimination. PSU's policies require faculty members to report any instance of sexual harassment, sexual violence, or other forms of prohibited discrimination. If you would rather share information about these experiences with an employee who does not have these reporting responsibilities and can keep the information confidential, please contact a confidential advocate (503.725.5672 or [online](#)) or another confidential employee listed on the sexual misconduct resource [webpage](#).

Disabilities. If you have, or think you may have, a disability that may affect your work in this class and feel you need accommodations, contact the [Disability Resource Center](#) to schedule an appointment and initiate a conversation about reasonable accommodations. The [PSU CARES](#) Team, hosted by the Dean of Student Life, is available to consult with you regarding any issues of students in distress, including sexual misconduct.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE and ASSIGNMENTS

Chapters from the Kinsella and Carr reader (MWR) are assigned each week. Additional assigned readings are available online.

Historical and Philosophical Approaches to War and Morality

6, 8 Jan *Realism and Pacifism*

- MWR, chaps. 1-3.
- [slides](#)

13, 15 Jan *Just War Theory*

- MWR, chap. 4
- John Fabian Witt, *Lincoln's Code: The Laws of War in American History* (Free Press, 2012), chap. 1. on reserve
- [slides](#)

Resort to War (*Jus ad Bellum*)

22 Jan *Aggression, Self-Defense, and Preemption*

- MWR, chaps. 5-6.
- Chris O'Meara, "Ukraine's Incursion into Kursk Oblast: A Lawful Case of Defensive Invasion?" *Just Security*, 23 August 2024. [online](#)
- [slides](#)

- 27, 29 Jan *Terrorism*
- MWR, chap. 7.
 - Brian Morton, "Terror and the Ethics of Resistance." *Dissent* 71 (Winter 2024): 117-122. [online](#)
 - [slides](#)
- 3 Feb *Military Intervention*
- MWR, chap. 8.
 - Jeremy Moses, "Gaza and the Political and Moral Failure of the Responsibility to Protect." *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 18 (February 2024): 211-215. [online](#)
 - [slides](#)
- 5 Feb **Midterm exam**
- Conduct of War (*Jus in Bello*)**
- 10, 12 Feb *Combatant Rights*
- MWR, chap. 9.
 - Michael Welch, "Doing Special Things to Special People in Special Places: Psychologists in the CIA Torture Program." *The Prison Journal* 97 (December 2017): 729-749.
 - [slides](#)
- 17, 19 Feb *Noncombatant Rights*
- MWR, chap. 10
 - Chris McQuade, "On Forcing Civilians to Remain in Hostile Zones: The Prohibition of Shielding and the Corresponding Obligations of an Attacking Party Under International Humanitarian Law." *Opinio Juris*, December 12, 2023. [online](#)
 - [slides](#)
- 24, 26 Feb *Blockades, Sanctions, and High-Tech Warfare*
- MWR, chaps. 11-12.
 - Robert Lawless and Hitoshi Nasu, "Electronic Warfare and the Law of Armed Conflict." *Articles of War*, Lieber Institute, West Point, October 28, 2024. [online](#)
 - [slides](#)
- War Crimes and Judgment (*Jus post Bellum*)**
- 3, 5 Mar *War and Crime*
- MWR, chap. 13.
 - Tom Dannenbaum, "Nuts and Bolts of the International Criminal Court Arrest Warrants

- in the ‘Situation in Palestine’.” *Just Security*, 22 November 2022. [online](#)
▪ [slides](#)

10, 12 Mar *Jurisdiction and Enforcement*

- MWR, chap. 14.
- [slides](#)

19 Mar **Final Exam**, 12:30-2:20

This syllabus is available online at web.pdx.edu/~kinsella/ps371w25.pdf and all course materials can be linked from this address. *Last updated on 5 January 2025.*