

Change in Warfare Thinking and Walzer's Views

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Introduction

Ideas about the morality of war did not develop in a straight line from one thinker to the next, but Hugo Grotius, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Michael Walzer mark important stages in the effort to place political violence under moral and legal judgment. Grotius wrote in the seventeenth century when dynastic rivalry, religious conflict, maritime commerce, and emerging state sovereignty made questions about war and international obligation especially urgent. Rousseau wrote in the eighteenth century and shifted attention toward political legitimacy, citizenship, and the relationship between individuals and states. Walzer, writing in the twentieth century, revived just-war reasoning for a world shaped by modern states, mass armies, guerrilla war, intervention, and highly destructive military technology. Their differences matter, but all three resist the claim that war suspends morality.

Modern just-war theory is often organized around *jus ad bellum*, the justice of resorting to war, and *jus in bello*, the justice of conduct during war. Contemporary discussions sometimes add *jus post bellum*, concerning the justice of war termination and peace. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy identifies Grotius as a major classical figure in this tradition and Walzer as one of its most influential contemporary theorists. The intellectual movement from Grotius to Rousseau to Walzer therefore illustrates how arguments about sovereignty, aggression, civilians, combatants, and restraint evolved while preserving one basic premise: political communities and soldiers remain subject to moral limits even during armed conflict (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2026).

Grotius: War Can Be Judged

Grotius's importance lies less in inventing the just-war tradition than in systematizing a broad body of legal, theological, historical, and philosophical reasoning. In *On the Law of War and Peace*, he argues that war does not eliminate law. Political communities remain bound by obligations concerning promises, injury, property, treaties, punishment, prisoners, and peace. This was an important intervention in an era when rulers could portray force as a matter of necessity or sovereign discretion. Grotius instead treated reasons for war as open to evaluation.

He recognized defense, recovery of what was wrongfully taken, and punishment of wrongdoing

among possible just causes, while rejecting glory or arbitrary conquest as sufficient reasons. Some of his permissions are broader than contemporary international law would accept, particularly where punishment, colonial expansion, and property are concerned. His significance is therefore historical rather than literal. He helped establish the idea that the decision to wage war and the conduct of war could be discussed through rules that transcend the immediate interests of the belligerent. This tradition connects with the broader development described in [the writings of Hugo Grotius](#) and later theorists of international order.

Rousseau: Political Community Without Personal Enmity

Rousseau approaches war through his theory of political legitimacy. His social-contract argument asks how free individuals can form a legitimate political community without simply submitting to arbitrary power. The general will is meant to represent the common interest of citizens as members of that political community, not the private preference of a temporary majority. This emphasis on popular sovereignty can appear strongly state-centered, but Rousseau was also deeply skeptical of interstate rivalry and the insecurity created by competition among sovereign states.

His most influential contribution to the ethics of war is the claim that war is fundamentally a relation between states rather than a natural personal relation between individuals. Soldiers become enemies because of their military role, not because their personal existence makes them legitimate targets. When combatants surrender or cease fighting, their moral status changes. Civilians likewise should not be treated as enemies merely because they belong to the opposing society. This distinction anticipates principles that later became central to humanitarian law. Rousseau therefore combines a strong account of political community with an equally important limitation: membership in an enemy state does not erase individual moral protection.

Walzer: Aggression, Rights, and the Independence of Conduct in War

Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars* adapts the older tradition to modern conflict. His framework distinguishes the justice of entering war from the justice of conduct after war has begun. This separation matters because a state fighting defensively can still commit wrongful acts, while soldiers on the unjust side remain bound by rules governing how they fight. Walzer's approach is often described as traditionalist or legalist because it assigns strong moral importance to state sovereignty, aggression, self-defense, combatant status, and civilian immunity (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2026).

Aggression is central because it violates the territorial integrity and political independence of a

community. Self-defense and assistance to a victim of aggression can therefore be morally different from conquest or opportunistic intervention. At the same time, Walzer insists that civilians may not be intentionally targeted simply because harming them could create political or military pressure. Combatants are generally liable to attack because of their role in organized fighting; civilians retain protection. Incidental civilian harm raises further questions about proportionality and precautions. The difficulty of these judgments does not make them optional.

What Changes Across the Three Thinkers

The three thinkers differ in how they justify political authority and international obligation. Grotius relies heavily on natural law and legal principles that apply across political communities. Rousseau places greater emphasis on legitimate collective self-rule and the moral distinction between states as belligerents and individuals as persons. Walzer works within a modern rights-based framework that treats political communities as possessing important claims against aggression while preserving strong protections for noncombatants.

These differences make it misleading to map the thinkers onto present-day political party labels. Grotius cannot simply be called a modern conservative, Rousseau cannot be translated directly into a contemporary progressive program, and Walzer's arguments have been used to criticize wars undertaken by governments across ideological traditions. Their relevance lies in the conceptual problems they illuminate: what counts as a legitimate cause for war, who has authority to decide, which people may be targeted, how proportionality should operate, and whether necessity can excuse otherwise wrongful acts.

From Moral Philosophy to Contemporary International Law

Modern international law reflects centuries of related debate even though it does not simply reproduce any one philosopher's theory. The United Nations Charter generally prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of states while recognizing self-defense and creating a system of collective security. International humanitarian law regulates conduct during armed conflict through principles including distinction, proportionality, humane treatment, and protection of people who are not or are no longer participating in hostilities. These legal rules are not identical to philosophical just-war theory, but the overlap is substantial.

The enduring significance of the tradition is that it refuses to let political necessity become an unlimited justification. War affects infrastructure, trade, public health, education, displacement, families, and institutions as well as military forces. Economic interest, national identity, and security can all influence decisions, but they do not by themselves establish a just cause. The moral and legal questions remain whether force is justified, whether alternatives were available, and whether the

methods used respect the rights of people who should not be treated as targets.

Conclusion

Grotius, Rousseau, and Walzer represent different stages in a continuing argument about how violence can be limited by law and morality. Grotius systematized the claim that war remains subject to judgment. Rousseau clarified the moral distinction between political enemies and private individuals. Walzer developed a modern framework separating the justice of going to war from the justice of conduct within war while emphasizing aggression, self-defense, combatant status, and civilian protection. Their theories differ substantially, but their shared importance lies in rejecting unrestricted power. Even under extreme political pressure, leaders and soldiers remain answerable for why force is used and for how human beings are treated once conflict begins.

References

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