

## **Just War Theory for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: is Climate Change ‘Just Cause’ for War? Atticus Carnell, Class of 2018**

Just war theory is the moral doctrine that governs war. It is the intellectual tradition behind the Hague and Geneva conventions and behind most countries rules of engagement. Just war theory distinguishes the morality of a nation’s or another group’s resort to war (as in, “is the war that Nation A is fighting just?”) from moral conduct within war (as in, “is X act of war carried out by Nation A morally justified, or, more broadly, is Nation A fighting its war in an ethical way?”). In order for a nation’s resort to war to be just, there are five criteria, known as *jus ad bellum* (Latin for ‘right to war’), that must be met: (1) the war must have a ‘just cause,’ (2) the good that war achieves (as in, the just cause) must be ‘proportionate’ to the harm that it causes, (3) war must actually be ‘necessary’ to achieve the just cause (in other words, if diplomacy could succeed, it is required instead of war)—intuitively, some people call this criteria ‘last resort,’ as in “war was out last resort,” (4) those who initiate and fight in war must have the ‘right intention’ in doing so, and (5) those who initiate war must have ‘competent authority’ to do so.

Traditionally, aggression, conceived narrowly as a violation of a nation’s borders or sovereignty, is considered the only just cause for war. Recently, however, a number of theorists have challenged this understanding. For example, Jeff McMahan argues that Nation A has just cause for war against Nation B only when Nation B forfeits its rights against being warred upon by violating or threatening to violate the rights of the people of Nation A.<sup>1</sup> Of course, because war usually involves killing, the rights violation in question has to be serious enough that killing is justified to rectify or prevent it. Other theorists have taken similar understandings of just cause to more radical conclusions. For example, Cécile Fabre argues that ‘subsistence wars’ a permissible, that a nation can be justified in going to war to secure what its citizens need to live a minimally decent life.<sup>2</sup>

But what about climate change? It seems that a goal of rectifying or preventing some of the harms of climate change, which has already begun to cause severe harm to many people, could meet McMahan’s criteria for just cause. So, along these lines, are the people of a small island nation that will be swallowed up by rising sea levels be permitted to annex part of developed nation that bears considerable responsibility for climate change, in order to have a place to live? Could a nation otherwise severely affected by climate change go to war with the goals of coercing large developed nations to pay for its adaptation to climate change and to invest heavily in sources of energy that do not emit GHGs?

I spent this summer arguing that climate change indeed can be just cause for war. Nations that are responsible for the majority of the world’s ‘luxury’ (as distinguished from ‘subsistence’) GHG emissions and that have consistently fail to take meaningful action to change this are liable to be warred upon because they violate the rights to life, health, subsistence, self-determination, among others, of the people most severely threatened by climate change. Simon Caney notes that, “in debates surrounding global justice... the emphasis has been on [the duties of the affluent and powerful] to comply with the principles of justice,”<sup>3</sup> but not on how the victims of injustice are permitted to respond when the affluent and powerful do not. This is, of course, a serious omission, and I am glad to have had the opportunity to add something to a relatively sparse body of literature. Along those lines, I am grateful to the Hughes Family Fellowship for funding this project. And, of course, I am very grateful to Professor Conly and Professor Franco for advising me as I undertook it. I could not have asked for better mentors.

**Faculty Mentors: Sarah Conly (Philosophy) and Paul Franco (Government & Legal Studies)  
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<sup>1</sup> McMahan, Jeff. “Just Cause for War.” *Ethics & International Affairs* Vol. 19, No. 3 (2005)

<sup>2</sup> Fabre, Cécile. *Cosmopolitan Wars*. “Subsistence Wars.” Oxford University Press (2012)

<sup>3</sup> Caney, Simon. “Responding to Global Injustice: On the Right of Resistance.” *Social Philosophy and Policy* Vol. 32, No. 1 (2015). 1