Book Review: Limited Force and the Fight for the Just War Tradition

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What is ethical, morally justified war-making? The answer is located near the intersection of religion, ethics, statecraft, law, and military strategy. Theologians, jurists, military professionals, and politicians have debated the morality of war-making since the earliest of times. In the West, the roots of just war morality and law spring from Roman philosopher Cicero (106–43 BC), were adapted into Roman Catholic teaching by Saint Augustine (354–430 AD), and were then encoded by Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–74 AD) in his *Summa Theologica*. Classic Western just war ethics rooted in Roman Catholic dogma expressly seeks to eliminate and regulate war-making. This system was brilliantly codified into international law by the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), who laid out the distinction between legal causes of war and the just conduct of war. The moral debate continues today.

Christian Nikolaus Braun’s closely reasoned new book examines the morality of limited force events through a casuistic method relying heavily upon classic just war theory. *Limited Force and the Fight for the Just War Tradition* is for readers seeking deep reflection on the knotty ethical conundrums of war-making, not casual readers. Braun focuses on the issues surrounding limited force, like targeted assassinations or limited strikes to enforce international norms.

Braun attempts to find common ground between Michael Walzer’s mainstream school of thought found in *Just and Unjust Wars* (Basic Books, 1977) and subsequent writings. Walzer’s critics complain he separates the ethic of beginning a war from the ethical means of waging war, therefore, a nation or a combatant could be just and unjust simultaneously. Braun compares Walzer’s thoughts with the ideas of the virtue ethicists, whom he identifies as revisionists, stating, “Walzer starts by thinking about war, revisionists start by thinking about the ethics of killing outside of war, then apply those principles
to the case of war” (23). Virtue ethicists weigh all actions through personal and community virtues and generally reject the moral equivalency of actors and actions.

Braun seeks middle ground by employing a casuistic method to solve moral problems by finding ethical principles in particular events and applying those principles to new situations. Still, Braun is quite clear that his ideas are founded upon classical Thomistic just war teachings. I must note, he does not attempt to engage other streams of just war thought such as Eastern Orthodox theology, which understands war and violence to be sinful, tragic realities necessitating repentance and forgiveness, or pacifist thought that allows no moral place for violence at all—nor does he explore any Eastern schools of thought arising from religions such as Taoism or Buddhism.

The book begins with a helpful introduction to Braun’s method and proceeds with three closely reasoned chapters covering the problem while discussing Walzerian and revisionist approaches to just war ethics. The central portion contains a solidly reasoned return to classical just war theory as propounded by Aquinas. The four closing chapters evaluate the ethics of seven kinetic limited force events accomplished by American forces under Presidents Ronald Reagan through Donald Trump.

Braun broadly assumes that in each case a state of war exists between the American government and the targeted individuals or organizations, even while indicating a preference for treating the events with civil trials and sentencing. This compounded view illuminates the struggle between a military action’s legality and necessity. I remind readers that what is legal is not necessarily ethical, and vice versa—considering law attempts to codify cultural, national, or international morality. The discussion includes many categories of classical just war consideration, including last resort, self-defense, right intention, legitimate authority, protection of others, retribution, and deterrence.

Braun sums up his argument, writing, “…[B]y presenting the Thomistic just war as a third-way in between Walzerians and Revisionists, this book seeks to remind contemporary thinkers of the tradition’s core—namely, its practical function as a guide to statecraft” (220). Herein lies the book’s value—to expand readers’ understanding of the ethical landscape in which they live and inform the continuing debate as humanity searches for the intersection of religion, ethics, statecraft, law, and military strategy to build a world in which everyone can thrive.

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