There is a huge amount written about [the ethics of war](http://www.rsrevision.com/Alevel/ethics/war/ethics.htm), and with each new conflict, hundreds of ethicists repeat their convictions. Some believe war is a necessary evil. Others believe war can never be justified. As an ethicist, you should not make up your opinion in advance. Each new conflict should be looked at and judged according to the specifics of that conflict.

If you are an ethics student, you will no doubt have learnt the [Just War criteria](http://www.rsrevision.com/Alevel/ethics/war/issues.htm) off by heart. Good. However, you need to be aware of where these criteria have come from. You also need to be able to apply these in an objective way to the conflict you are studying. Too often, these criteria are simply used to justify a decision that's already been made.

Some scholars claim that the Just War criteria need to be updated - that they simply don't apply in modern war-fare. You need to understand why they say this, particularly post-9-11 and with the specific issue of terrorism. As an ethics student, you need to understand what different [ethical theories](http://www.rsrevision.com/Alevel/ethics/war/ethics.htm) would say about [individual conflicts](http://www.rsrevision.com/Alevel/ethics/war/cases.htm) and modern warfare in general.

**Ethical responses to War**

**Utilitarianism**

In Utilitarianism, the end justifies the means. Strictly speaking, a country wouldn't need a just cause to go to war as long as they had the right intention - the greatest good for the greatest number. Since the Iraq War began, there has been a vast amount of cynicism surrounding the decision to go to war and the motives of people like Bush, with Michael Moore's Fahrenheit 9/11 an excellent example, A utilitarian would not support selfish motives. However, utilitarians would be happy for the military or the President to make up a threat so long as the ensuing war made the world a better place.

Rule Utilitarians may have a different approach, arguing that a world where people go to war without a just cause would be an unstable world. Therefore the Just War Criteria, although in many cases not utilitarian, may be necessary to make the world a better place.

**Kant's Ethical Theory**

Kant would not support needlessly going to war, as it would mean willing that I might be shot, which is contrary to the will. However, his theory would support declaring war in defense of others. We could happily universalise a maxim that said we should go to war to defend another country from attack - because we too would want to be defended if we were attacked.

Kant also said we should never treat humanity 'merely as a means to an end'. However, soldiers are fighting for their own safety, and they are paid. If soldiers had no vested interest in making the world a safer place, then they would be merely being used. This means we would have to look closely at the justification for going to war to see if Kant would support it.

**Natural Law**

One Primary Precept is that we should 'protect and preserve the innocent', which would justify going to war to defend others. However, Natural Law theorists would see this very much as a last resort. They would also criticise the way in which wars are fought, with a lack of respect for human beings.

Another Primary Precept says that we should live in an 'ordered society'. If an attack threatens the structure and authority of our society, this may justify our retaliation.

It is worth noting, however, that early Catholics were largely pacifist. The principles of Natural Law are based on the concept of the sanctity of life - all life is sacred. It is impossible to fight a war without some innocent people being killed, so every other possible solution must be sought before war is declared.

**Situation Ethics**

Situation Ethics demands that we do the most loving thing. This may mean going to war - Augustine said that while we may go to war, we should love our enemies (as Jesus instructed) even as we kill them. However, situation ethics would be against the use of excessive force, using nuclear, chemical or biological weapons etc.

**Virtue Ethics**

War is not part of eudaimonia. However, it may be possible to go to war in order to achieve peace, which would be part of eudaimonia.

Virtue Ethics focusses on character, and may argue that soldiers are brave and just, as they stand up for the poor and weak. However, the realities of being a soldier are that you just follow orders - not an example of wisdom, one of the cardinal virtues.

Virtue ethics has something interesting to say about the training of soldiers. If you behave a certain way, you develop that trait. Virtue Ethics may suggest that it is wrong to train soldiers to hate and kill, as they will continue to behave that way. An example from film is 'First Blood' - the first film featuring Rambo, a soldier returning from Vietnam who starts killling people one by one. A more recent, and real, example is the treatment of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Grhaib.These soldiers were trained to hate, so is it any surprise that this is what they did?

**Issues raised by war**

**Just War**

Nearly all ethical discussion about war focusses on one question: is war justified? In the case of a particular conflict, this means 'Was it right to go to war?' and 'Is the way the war is being fought just?'

These questions date back to Augustine, who is seen by many as the originator of 'Just War Theory'. When the Roman Empire became Christian, Augustine had to convince a pacifist religion that it was sometimes necessary to go to war. His thinking was developed by Aquinas and then more recently by other Catholic theologians. Today, most commentators in the West use the Just War criteria as their starting point, and although Western leaders may wish to challenge or change aspects of the theory, there is a tacit acceptance that the theory is actually broadly right.

**Jus ad bellum**

*Jus ad bellum* refers to the rules concerning the declaration of war, and includes:

* Proper Authority - War should be declared by the proper authority
* Just Cause - A nation should have a justifiable reason for declaring war
* Right Intention - The outcome being sought should be noble, generally to bring about peace
* Last Resort - Every effort should have been made to resolve a conflict diplomatically, without the use of force
* Proportionality - The damage caused by going to war must not be greater than the good achieved
* Win Possible - there should be a good chance of success
* Comparative Justice - neither side will ever be without fault, but you need to be more right than your opponents

These criteria have remained broadly unchanged for centuries, although specific details have altered. For example, the UN Charter states that the UN should authorise any use of force beyond repelling an immediate armed attack against a sovereign territory. Some nations, however, do not recognise the UN's authority.

**Jus in bello**

A level text books describe this as 'Just Method'. This includes:

* 'Discrimination' - that innocent people should not be targetted. As explained in the [definitions](http://www.rsrevision.com/Alevel/ethics/war/definitions.htm) of key terms, some commentators speak of 'civilians' or 'non-combatants' here
* 'Proportionality' - as above, that military force should be proportional to the wrong endured and the outcome sought. Minimum force should be used to achieve the desired ends

**Nuclear, Chemical and Biological weapons**

Due to the nature of these weapons, it is generally agreed that the Jus in Bello criteria above cannot be met if chemical, nuclear or biological weapons are used. Obviously a lot depends on the nature of these weapons, and the term 'nuclear weapon' can apply to a broad range of devices. Where weapons kill indiscriminately, there are real concerns.

In 2006, cluster bombs were dropped on Lebanon. Only 40% of these exploded on contact, leaving more than half unexploded. Just like land-mines, these are still causing serious disability and death to innocent people, especially children, and will for many years to come. These sorts of weapons are also seen as a violation of Jus in Bello.