

Course Syllabus

**THE USE OF FORCE:
POLITICAL AND MORAL CRITERIA**

Fall 2025
Room D21-22

Professor Thierry Senechal

I. Course Objectives

The course is designed to foster reflection, debate, and decision-making across the lines of politics, strategy, and ethics. It will focus on normative discourse about war and peace. Primary attention will be paid analytically and historically to the 'Just-War Ethic'. Readings and lectures will examine the ethics in light of challenges from other normative positions and the nature of modern war. The Just-War Ethic will be assessed and applied to address three broad political and strategic challenges: nuclear strategy, modern warfare, humanitarian intervention, and terrorism.

II. Course Design and Requirements

Learning Approach: The course develops students' ability to analyze high-stakes moral dilemmas, navigate complexity, and take ethically grounded action. Through "case-in-point" learning and group work, students confront simulated crises requiring rapid evaluation, moral judgment, and decision-making. Emphasis is placed on values, virtues, and the exercise of moral agency in creating public value. Students will learn to:

- Assess moral dilemmas under sudden adversity.
- Discuss and critique ethical arguments.
- Understand and appreciate moral disagreements.
- Make informed moral judgments leading to action while weighing risks.
- Build moral and ethical literacy.

Expectations: The conversation on moral obligations will be engaging if participants are willing to take risky or unpopular points of view; participate in debates, and role plays; use logic, precision, and evidence in making arguments, apply course materials appropriately; and are constructively critical. It is emphasized that it is impossible to teach such a course without touching upon issues that will be challenging for some students. Part of our task is to learn how to discuss these topics productively. A non-negotiable norm will be to create a safe space to tackle these matters. Safe, however, does not mean avoiding difficult, troubling, upsetting, unsettling, and sometimes emotionally charged topics. Great care will be taken to confront these issues responsibly.

You must be prepared for each class. Active and informed participation is crucial. You must conscientiously complete the readings, prepare for and participate in the structured group exercises as expected, and be prepared to share your insights with the class. Failure to prepare for the class will adversely affect your class participation grade and impair your learning experience.

Attendance: Mandatory.

Grading: 40% individual class participation and preparation, and 60% group memos/presentations on crisis scenarios.

Academic Integrity: Strict adherence required.

Use of technology: Mobile devices (phones, computers, recording devices..., etc.) are not allowed in class except during group presentations.

III. Schedule of Lectures

SESSION 1 – THE MORALITY OF WAR: POLES OF THE DEBATE

(Monday 29 September, 10.00-13.00, Room D21-22)

This session examines the ethical and political problem of the use of force in international affairs. First, we will review normative ‘moral frameworks’ (utilitarian, libertarian, Aristotelian, and Kantian/Rawlsian) underlying moral obligations and potentially guiding responses to adverse situations in world affairs. Then, we will distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate interventions by defining key areas, conditions, and procedures for lawful action. Special focus will be placed on the “Just War/Just Defense” tradition, analyzed both historically and conceptually. We will discuss different warfare traditions and how they shape contemporary debates on intervention. A case study on George W. Bush, 9/11, and the Iraq War will ground these issues in practice.

Case study: New Peril, Old Adversary: George W. Bush, 9/11, & Iraq (B) The Road to War (Case KSG Case 2131)

Main readings:

- ‘Ethical Theory’, in *Ethics in Practice: An Anthology*, Wiley Blackwell, 2014, pp. 23-70
- Michael Walzer, *The Triumph of Just War Theory (and the Dangers of Success)*, 2012
- Bryan Hehir, Just War Theory in a Post-Cold War World, *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 1992, pp. 237-257
- J. Childress, “Moral Discourse about War in the Early Church,” in P. Peachey, ed., *Peace, Politics and the People of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) pp. 117-134.
- R.L. Holmes, “Can War be Morally Justified?,” in J.B. Elshtain, cited, pp. 197-223.
- F.H. Russell, *The Just War in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) pp. 16-39.
- Sophocles, *Antigone* (Read in French or English)

Memo #1: Is the Second Gulf War (2003) A Just War?

SESSION 2 – THE USE OF FORCE AND THE RESPONSE TO TERROR

(Monday 6 October, 10.00-13.00, Room D21-22)

Terrorism has gained prominence in the past decades. Various state and non-state actors use this strategy of intimidating or impressing others through means of violence and repeated threats, with the killing or severe harming of innocents, or the repeated destruction or severe harming of their property. In this session, we discuss ethical issues in devising a response to threats posed by terrorist groups. We use a case study to distinguish moral approaches to practical problems in the fight against terrorism from nonmoral approaches based on legal, historical (analogy), special

interests, and security considerations. We pose these questions: Can the din of conflicting moral norms or considerations prevent us from reaching an ethical standard for making hard choices, e.g. the use of torture? Or, can we agree on principles and parameters to propose a framework to help respond to practical issues, and choose between values, weigh priorities, and respond to tradeoffs? In other words, we will ask the question: Are there ways—even narrow—to reconcile what is usually referred to as the ‘realistic approach’ to international politics, with the demands of morality?

Case study: Defining Torture in the War on Terrors (A): “Checking with the Professionals” (Case C15-06-1853.0)

Main readings:

- Michael Walzer, *Arguing About War*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004) pp. 130-142.
- Brian Orend, “Michael Walzer on Resorting to Force”, in *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, September 2000, pp. 523-547.
- S. H. Hashmi, “Interpreting the Islamic Ethic of War and Peace,” in T. Nardin, ed., *The Ethics of War and Peace. Religious and Secular Perspectives* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996) pp. 146-168.
- Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Just War as a Theory, Just Peace as a Virtue*, *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 2024
- Jeff McMahan, *Torture, Morality, and Law*, *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* Volume 37 | Issue 2, 2006
- *Talking about Terror*, Philip Heymann, 2004 (<https://hls.harvard.edu/today/talking-about-terror/>)
- See also: <https://www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/a-framework-for-ethical-decision-making/>
- *Global Terrorism Threat Assessment 2025*, CSIS

Memo #2: Decision-making under pressure - Imminent Terrorist Attack

SESSION 3 – ETHICS IN THE NUCLEAR AGE

(Monday 13 October, 10.00-13.00, Room D21-22)

In this session, we examine the ethical and strategic dilemmas of the nuclear age through the case of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We contrast strategic discourse—focused on deterrence, victory, and security—with ethical discourse rooted in just war principles. The morality of obliteration bombing and the deliberate targeting of civilians will be analyzed as central ethical challenges. We will assess whether stable deterrence provides peace or merely entrenches the threat of mass destruction. Debate will focus on reconciling military necessity with humanitarian values in nuclear strategy. Finally, we reflect on whether the nuclear age compels us toward disarmament as a moral and political imperative.

Case study: The Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

Main readings:

- McGeorge Bundy, “The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb,” *International Security* 2, no. 2 (Autumn 1988): 6-40.

- B. Bernstein, "The Atomic Bombings Reconsidered," *Foreign Affairs* 74 (January/February 1995) pp. 135-153.
- The Hiroshima and Nagasaki Nuclear Bombing - Hiroshima Notes, Kenzaburo Oe (Japan, 1965, Chapter 5 - The Unsundered People).
- Hersey, J. (1946, August 31). Hiroshima. *The New Yorker*.
- Obama's speech at Hiroshima, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/05/27/remarks-President-obama-and-prime-minister-abe-japan-hiroshima-peace>.

Memo #3: Dropping of Atomic Bombs: Can you sacrifice some lives in order to save many others?

SESSION 4 – HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION

(Monday 3 November, 10.00-13.00, Room D21-22)

We discuss human rights as an extreme example of the difficulties in reconciling ethics and international relations. We ask these questions: Can equal importance be given to all human rights? If we consider human rights the domain of strong moral obligation, what are the duties of world leaders in the face of abuses? What are the issues related to assessing human rights violations? How do we address large-scale or systematic human rights violations when the justice system cannot respond adequately? How do we design ethical dispute resolution systems, truth-seeking and reparation processes?

Case study: Fallen Idol? Aung San Suu Kyi & The Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis (HKS Case KS1277)

Main readings:

- Amartya Sen, "Culture and Human Rights", in *Development as Freedom*, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 227-249 (22 pages)
- Gary Haugen and Victor Boutros, "And Justice for All: Enforcing Human Rights for the World's Poor", in *Foreign Affairs*, 1 May 2010 (8 pages)
- S. Hoffmann, *Duties Beyond Borders. "On the Limits and the Possibilities of Ethical International Politics"* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1981) pp. 45-84.
- James P. Sterba, "Hoffmann's Kantian Justification for Humanitarian Intervention", in *The Ethics and Politics of Humanitarian Intervention*, University of Notre Dame, 1996, pp. 87-86 (10 pages)
- *Ethics & International Affairs*, Sri Lanka 2.0: Independent Inquiry Shows UN "Systemic Failure" in Myanmar, July 2019, <https://www.ethicsandinternationalaffairs.org/2019/sri-lanka-2-0-independent-inquiry-shows-un-systemic-failure-in-myanmar/>

Memo #4: Intervention for the Rohingyas

SESSION 5 – BOSNIA, KOSOVO, SOMALIA, RWANDA, AND DARFUR: THE ROAD TO GENOCIDE AND BEYOND

(Monday 10 November, 10.00-13.00, Room D21-22)

The objective of this session is to analyze several humanitarian crises, including the Rwanda genocide as a case study in the ethics of war and intervention. Students will examine how political failure, international inaction, and moral disengagement contributed to one of the late

twentieth century's gravest atrocities. Through the lens of the just war tradition and alternative moral frameworks, the session will explore questions of legitimate intervention, sovereignty, and the responsibilities of states and international institutions. Emphasis will be placed on understanding the UN's decision-making process, evaluating whether humanitarian intervention was morally required, and considering how ethical reasoning might have altered outcomes. Ultimately, the session seeks to equip students with the analytical tools to confront similar dilemmas in contemporary crises where the tension between justice, sovereignty, and the use of force remains acute.

Case study: The Genocide in Rwanda: An Interpretative Case Study of the UN Decision-Making Process, Sandra Krüger

Main readings:

- Power, Samantha. *"A Problem from Hell": America and the Age of Genocide*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.

Memo #5: UN Intervention in Rwanda: What are the Options?

SESSION 6 – RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR: CHOICES AND CONSEQUENCES

(Monday 17 November, 10.00-13.00, Room D21-22)

This session will analyze the Russian-Ukrainian war as a contemporary case of armed conflict where questions of sovereignty, just cause, and proportionality confront the realities of modern geopolitics. Students will examine the moral and political choices faced by Russia, Ukraine, NATO, and other international actors, focusing on the ethical reasoning behind intervention, deterrence, and escalation. Attention will be given to the consequences of the war for the international order, the responsibility to protect, and the evolving limits of the just war tradition. By situating the conflict within broader debates about power, law, and morality, the session seeks to equip participants with tools to critically assess both immediate decisions and long-term global repercussions.

Main readings:

- To be provided.

Rebuttal session #1: Instructions to be provided

SESSION 7 – THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT: MEASURING JUST CAUSE AND JUST MEANS

(Monday 24 November, 10.00-13.00, Room D21-22)

This session will examine the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the lens of the just war tradition, focusing on how competing claims to just cause and debates over just means have shaped the use of force. Students will analyze the historical, political, and moral dimensions of the conflict. Particular attention will be given to the dilemmas posed by asymmetric warfare, occupation, and resistance, and how these challenge established criteria of justice in war. The session will also consider the broader implications for regional stability and the role of international law and diplomacy in mediating persistent cycles of violence.

Main readings:

- To be provided.

Rebuttal session #2: Instructions to be provided

SESSION 8 – NEW PATTERN OF INTERVENTIONS AND THE ROLE OF THE UNITED NATIONS

(Monday 2 December 10.00-13.00, Room D21-22)

This session examines how the United Nations adapts to new patterns of intervention through the prism of just war theory. We explore the ethical tension between legitimate humanitarian action and illegitimate violations of sovereignty. Debate will focus on the UN's evolving peace operations and the ethics of preventive and coercive measures. We ask whether reforms can reconcile strategic effectiveness with adherence to moral and legal norms of intervention. Finally, the session situates the UN within broader debates on justice, legitimacy, and the future of collective security.

Case study: Strategic Innovations at the United Nations (HBS case #8-722-363)

Main readings:

- Boutros-Ghali, B. (1992). Empowering the United Nations. *Foreign Affairs*, 71(5), 89-102.
- The World Is Changing Rapidly: Can the United Nations Restructure to Stay Relevant?, *The Global Observatory* (April 2025).
- The Future of United Nations Peace Operations, Koops & Dal Dosso (*Global Alliance for Peace Operations*, 2025).