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An Alternative to Pacifism?
Feminism and Just-War Theory

LUCINDA J. PEACH

Only rarely have feminist theorists addressed the adequacy of just-war theory, a set of principles developed over hundreds of years to assess the justice of going to war and the morality of conduct in war. Recently, a few feminist scholars have found just-war theory inadequate, yet their own counterproposals are also deficient. I assess feminist contributions to just-war theorizing and suggest ways of strengthening, rather than abandoning, this moral approach to war.

INTRODUCTION

Women have traditionally been excluded from involvement in war. War has been considered almost exclusively a male enterprise: fought by men, with and against other men, for male-defined purposes and ends. Culturally, traditional ideas about gender roles identify men with war and soldiering, and women with peace and mothering. Women remain largely absent from ethical and policy debates regarding when to go to war, how to fight a war, and whether resorting to war is morally justifiable. In recent years, several feminists have challenged this traditional genderized dichotomy between war and peace, as well as the validity of the male-conceived theories that assess the morality of war. In this paper, I evaluate feminist criticisms of one of these male-generated theories, that of just-war.1

After having no discernible impact on foreign policy analysis of any armed conflict for many years, just-war theory suddenly gained national prominence and recognition in relation to the Persian Gulf War. The theory developed over many centuries in Christian theology and international law into a set of criteria designed to determine when, and to what extent, limited participation in armed conflict may be moral. Just-war theorists generally share with pacifists a basic presumption opposing war as morally wrong (see Miller 1991, 117; Cady 1989). However, whereas pacifist perspectives share a firm belief that war is
never a moral means to achieve potentially just goals, those subscribing to just-war theory are open to being persuaded that war may be morally justified in certain circumstances. Both of these positions contrast with the views of “warists” or “war realists,” who consider morality to be irrelevant, inapplicable, or ineffective in relation to war (see Cady 1989, xi-xii). In our gender-structured society, warism has been the culturally dominant and presumptively correct view (see Cady 1989, chap. 1).

There are undoubtedly myriad problems with attempting to generalize a “feminist perspective” about just-war theory, given the variety of different feminist perspectives about the morality of war. Popular conception and actual practice alike align women with peace and pacifism, not with a position that accepts war as potentially moral. For example, women have been and continue to be more actively involved than men in peace movements. Recent public opinion polls indicate that women are more oriented to peaceful resolution of disputes than are men, reflecting an average 15 to 20 percent “gender gap” on the issue of military involvement and the use of force (see Gallagher 1993; Branscombe and Owen 1993; Baxter and Lansing 1983, 56-57, 196). Women’s social protest movements have achieved significant political leverage from their identification as “naturally” more peaceful than men, based on their relationship to childbearing and child-rearing (see Ruddick 1989; Pierson 1988; Swerdlow 1989).

But despite the historical and ideological alignments between women (and feminists) and peace, not all women, even feminist women, are pacifists. Political scientist Jean Bethke Elshtain, for instance, expressly denies that she is a pacifist, arguing that some wars have been necessary and that it is not possible to transcend “collective violence in defense of the state” (Elshtain 1987, 257). Feminist theorist Sara Ruddick aligns herself more with pacifism, especially in denouncing just-war theory for its legitimation of certain forms of violence. However, she argues that “threatened peoples [may] not have alternative nonviolent ways of protecting what they love and getting what they need” (Ruddick 1989, 139). Ruddick and Elshtain agree with St. Augustine, an early Christian Church Father who is considered to be the “founder” of just-war theory within the Christian tradition (see Kehoe 1986, 156), that war may be an element necessary to peace, rather than completely separate from it (Ruddick 1989, 137; Elshtain 1987, 253).

Even those women who do characterize themselves as pacifists may have radically diverse reasons for doing so, some of them drawing on just-war reasoning (see Cady 1989, chap. 4; Miller 1991, 104-05). Further, as Elshtain discusses, the notion of women’s innate or natural orientation to peace and pacifism needs to be questioned as a product of a gender system that serves to maintain men as strong warriors and women as weak and passive peacemakers, thereby perpetuating war rather than bringing peace. These factors suggest that a feminist appraisal of the just-war theory is an important component of feminist theorizing about war and peace.
Only a few feminist scholars have yet explicitly addressed just-war theory. Nonetheless, there have been a few significant feminist critiques of various elements found in just-war thinking. For example, Elshtain and Ruddick have both pointed to some specific deficiencies with traditional just-war thinking and have proposed alternative frameworks for analyzing the morality of war. In this article, I argue that many of the feminist criticisms that have been waged against traditional just-war theory are well taken. Notwithstanding the validity of these "deconstructive" efforts, however, to date no adequate constructive feminist alternative has been proposed. Rather than reject and/or replace traditional just-war theory, I argue, feminist principles and insights can and should provide a much needed reconceptualization and revitalization of the application of just-war criteria.

I begin with a brief background of just-war theory, including three classic contrasting approaches: those of Augustine, Reinhold Niebuhr, a mid-twentieth-century Protestant theologian, and Michael Walzer, a contemporary secular social and political theorist. Although by no means exhaustive of the complete spectrum of just-war ideas, these three views do exemplify some of the more significant strands and influences, both theological and secular, historical and contemporary, of the tradition. I then discuss significant ways in which traditional just-war thinking is deficient from a feminist perspective. I use Elshtain's and Ruddick's alternative approaches to the morality of war to illustrate how feminist efforts to replace just-war theory have been inadequate thus far. In the final part of the article, I outline how feminist perspectives and insights can provide a framework for revitalizing the application of just-war theory.

**THE JUST-WAR TRADITION**

The many variants of just-war theory which have been developed over the past millennium differ in the specific criteria used to determine the morality of war (both in general and in relation to particular conflicts), the burden of evidence necessary to satisfy those criteria, and the relation between criteria and their relative weight. Nonetheless, there is general agreement that just-war analysis entails two sets of criteria: one governing the morality of going to war (the *jus ad bellum*), the other the actual conduct of war (the *jus in bello*). There is also significant agreement that the *jus ad bellum* criteria include some or all of the following:

1. a just cause (self-defense or defense of others);
2. right authority (determination to go to war is made by the appropriate governing officials);
3. right intention (must be to reestablish peace);
4. proportionality (between means employed in fighting and ends or goals to be achieved);
5. relative justice (in acknowledging that no participant in war has absolute justice on their side);

6. last resort (all other alternatives for conflict resolution have been exhausted); and

7. a reasonable hope for success.

There is also substantial consensus that the *jus in bello* criteria require:

1. “discrimination” between combatants and noncombatants and the permissibility of intentionally killing only the former, thus according noncombatants immunity; and

2. “proportionality” of means and ends in relation to particular battles and strategies such that the benefits of going to war or conduct of a particular strategy or mission within the war must outweigh its harms.

Because many of these criteria are quite vague and general in scope, their application has resulted in significantly different determinations regarding the morality of particular wars, including the recent Persian Gulf conflict (see Sizemore 1992; Johnson and Weigel 1992; Geyer and Green 1992; Decosse 1992).

Augustine concluded that Christian participation in killing is permissible when: (1) the cause is just; (2) appropriate authority (in his case, the monarch) determines that undertaking war is necessary to prevent or punish injustice; and (3) the intention is to restore peace (see Hartigan 1966, 199). In Niebuhr's view, justice—a moral good necessary for life in a sinful world—requires Christians to participate in war to defend innocent victims of aggression and secure freedom for the oppressed (Niebuhr and Dun 1955, 77).

In contrast to these theological approaches, Walzer's secular theory presumes that the defense of human rights is the only legitimate reason for war (Walzer 1977, 72). His just-war approach makes the criteria of just cause central, and downplays the moral significance of the traditional criteria of proportionality and last resort (Walzer 1982, 548), even though he admits that “every military history is a tale of violence and destruction out of all relation to the requirements of combat” (Walzer 1977, 130). All three of these approaches are subject to significant feminist criticisms.

**Feminist criticisms of just-war theory**

Feminist criticisms of just-war theory are clustered around several concerns: its relation to realism; its failure to insist that all criteria have been satisfied in accordance with rigorous standards, especially in relation to attempting non-violent alternatives; its tendency to abstraction and to dichotomize reality in

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accordance with gendered distinctions; and the priority it accords to the state and to state authority vis-a-vis the individual. I will evaluate each of these criticisms in turn.

Realism. Realism is the political perspective that human nature makes war inevitable and unavoidable. Realism influences just-war thinking by creating a presumption that resort to war may be necessary. Realist attitudes thus enhance the possibility that a just-war analysis will result in the conclusion that the use of armed force is justified. Augustine's and Niebuhr's theologically based perspectives are both realist in viewing war as a necessary remedy for human sinfulness. Although Walzer explicitly intends his theory of human rights to provide an alternative to realism, he also tends to fall into realist modes of thought, evidenced by his failure to give more than cursory and pessimistic consideration to alternatives to war (see Walzer 1977, 329-35).

Many feminist scholars have criticized the realist elements of international relations theory in general, and just-war thinking in particular (see Ruddick 1989, 1987, and 1983; Tickner 1991; Grant and Newland 1991). In Ruddick's view, the realist paradigm misrepresents human beings as "primarily centers of dominating and defensive activity trying to achieve a stable autonomy in threatening hierarchies of strength" (Ruddick 1989, 183). Both she and Elshtain condemn realism's pessimism about human nature and blindness to the possibility of thinking in any terms other than war (Ruddick 1989, 136, 150; Elshtain 1985, 40-41).9

For Elshtain, traditional just-war theory is not problematic so much because it is itself realist as because it is anachronistic and no longer able to provide meaningful limits to war in a world governed by realist assumptions (Elshtain 1985, 47). Given the contemporary conditions of war, which include changes in the nature of political bodies, international relations, and "the totalistic deadliness of weapons" (Elshtain 1985, 46), just-war theory continually gets co-opted by the realist paradigm (Elshtain 1987, 166-67). As an example, she cites Walzer's reliance on viewing Nazism as an "immeasurable evil" to justify the overriding of in bello restraints during the British saturation bombing of German cities in World War II. She also points out how he uses the threat of nuclear war to justify a continuing "supreme emergency" that legitimizes the immoral use of deterrence strategy (Elshtain 1985, 46).10

Ruddick and Elshtain's criticisms accord with those of other feminist thinkers who challenge the realist view of human nature as a male notion about men (see Grant and Newland 1991; Grant 1991, 9; Tickner 1991). Elshtain specifically attributes just-war theory's restriction of the range of "symbolic and narrative possibilities" for thinking about conflict to realism's "suppression of female-linked imagery" (Elshtain 1987, 88; Elshtain 1985, 41). Whether or not one accepts such claims that prevailing conceptions of human nature are male-biased, or that women have different natures or roles (either culturally or biologically constructed), these feminist perspectives persuasively suggest
that realism provides an unduly limited view of human nature, one which can conceive of war as the only solution to conflict.

**Failure to Consider Alternatives to War.** The "last resort" criteria of just-war theory requires that meaningful alternatives to armed force have been tried and failed before resort to armed force can be morally justified. But in line with their realist orientation, many just-war theorists fail to consider alternatives to war fully (see Ruddick 1987; McMahon 1991). Augustine's just-war theory lacks any exhortation that non-violent methods of restoring peace be attempted prior to the use of armed force. Niebuhr's realist and theological presuppositions underlie his conclusion that pacifism is not a feasible alternative to armed force. In his view, no form of pacifism is adequate to deal with human self-interest and the will to power (Niebuhr 1940, 5, 25; see Miller 1991, 107).11

Among contemporary just-war theorists, the last resort criterion is often ignored or viewed, as Walzer does, as a "prudential" matter to be left to the discretion of government officials (see Tikkun 1991). Because Walzer considers nonviolent resistance to be dependent upon adherence to just-war principles by those with the means and the will to use violence, he gives only minimal consideration to pacifist alternatives to war. He is cynical about the effectiveness of nonviolent approaches to conflict resolution, arguing that they can only succeed if a number of preconditions exist, including the willingness—always uncertain—of the aggressor to abide by the war convention (Walzer 1977, 330-35). Where such preconditions do not exist, nonviolence "collapses into violence directed at oneself" (Walzer 1977, 332).

The U.S. Catholic bishops are distinctive among contemporary just-war theorists in seriously considering the possibility of nonviolent alternatives to war and the escalation of conflicts. Their statement in *The Challenge of Peace* includes proposals for a nuclear freeze, weapons reductions, arms control, and political and economic policies to enhance human rights and dignity (NCCB 1983). In addition, the bishops consider peace to be a duty, not merely "an optional commitment" (136). They are thus more progressive than most just-war theorists in having a vision that reaches toward peace, and not just the next war. Yet Walzer criticizes the Catholic Bishops for their emphasis on the requirement of last resort, claiming that it is "an endlessly receding possibility, invoked mostly by people who would prefer never to resist aggression with force. After all, there is always something else to do, another diplomatic note, another meeting" (Walzer 1991, 14; see Tikkun 1991, 40). Thus, despite his purported opposition to realism, Walzer ultimately does not take the possibility of alternatives to war any more seriously than Augustine or Niebuhr.

Ruddick opposes this tendency among just-war theorists to reject the morality of nonviolent resistance as an alternative to war (Ruddick 1989, 174-75). Elshtain recognizes that the lack of any enforcement mechanism to
insure that contact and attempts at negotiated settlement have been attempted before armed force may be utilized makes just-war theory subject to being manipulated as a prop for the promotion of "armed civic virtue" rather than as a constraint on war (Elshtain 1992, 43). The failure of most just-war theorists to seriously contemplate alternatives to war is thus radically deficient from the perspective of pacifist feminists and others opposed to a knee-jerk militaristic response to civil strife.

Abstract Thought. The media and the military's portrayal of the Persian Gulf War—a conflict Walzer concludes was a just war—as a video game using "smart bombs" to perform "precision" or "surgical" strikes against "strategic targets" rather than as the use of deadly weapons resulting in the bloody slaughter of thousands of human beings, civilians as well as soldiers, illustrates the kind of abstract thinking about war that feminists accuse just-war theorists of engaging in (see Elshtain 1992; Sizemore 1992, 947). Just-war theorists tend to couch their analyses in terms of hypotheticals rather than with reference to actual conflicts. For example, Niebuhr's work deserves Elshtain's criticism that just-war theorists fail to provide either specific, concrete guidelines for determining when war is moral or narratives to illustrate whether past wars have been just or not (e.g., Elshtain 1987, 159, 248-49; Elshtain 1985, 50).

In contrast with this tendency of prevailing just-war approaches to ignore how the criteria would apply to actual wars, a number of feminist theories stress the importance of the concrete and particular over the universal and abstract (see Gilligan 1882; Noddings 1984; Ruddick 1987, 93-97; Ruddick 1989, 139). Feminist analyses specifically reveal how abstraction in the application of just-war theory has resulted in: (1) a neglect of the horrors of war and its effects on individual bodies; (2) a perception of the enemy as "Other"; and (3) a fixation on principles of justice and rights rather than the needs and interests of specific persons in particular conflicts.

Ruddick perceives the abstractness of just-war theory as controlling "our perceptions of war, turning our attention from bodies and their fate to abstract causes and rules for achieving them" (Ruddick 1989, 150). Nancy Hartsock finds that the tendency to ignore actual bodies has been prevalent in militaristic thinking throughout the history of Western philosophical thought, despite the fact that warrioring is a bodily activity (see Hartsock 1982). For example, in Augustine's overall theological perspective, the self and the body have only a relative and temporary value as parts of earthly existence. The evil of war thus does not inhere in physical death, which will befall everyone sooner or later, but rather in vices such as "love of violence," "vengeful cruelty," and "lust for power" (Holmes 1969, 64), desires that are antithetical to eternal life in the heavenly City of God (Augustine 1984, 877).12

Nonetheless, Elshtain finds in Augustine "an exemplary alternative" to modern just-war theorists because he emphasizes suffering and regret rather than the abstract and rationalist tenor of modern approaches "that stress
legalities, rights, and the power of human reason” (Elshtain 1987, 129, 132). The “modern” attitude is illustrated by the “ technostrategic” discourse of nuclear defense professionals. Carol Cohn describes the “utter absence of the burning, explosive, flesh-tearing, radiation poisoning, life-annihilating devastation of nuclear war” in their rhetoric (Cohn 1989b, 156). The absence of such descriptions results in an ability to abstract nuclear weapons from the horrible reality of suffering they have the capacity to cause, and to legitimate the neglect of human bodies and lives (Cohn 1989a, 119, 135; Cohn 1989b).13

Carol Gilligan suggests that this capacity for abstraction also enables the denial of suffering because it replaces actual lives with hypothetical people (Gilligan 1977, 511). Many feminists counter the inattention just-war theorists give to the horrors of war by emphasizing the enormous suffering of actual individuals which war entails, not only during actual hostilities (e.g., Ruddick 1989, 157) but also by the military-industrial complex that prepares for and perpetuates wars (see, e.g., Chapkis 1981, 36; Reardon 1985; Brock-Utne 1985; Stephenson 1986, 86). As a contrast to abstract just-war thinking, Ruddick describes maternal thinking as generating “a sturdy antimilitaristic conception of the body” in which birth is privileged over death (Ruddick 1987, 216).

Another feminist criticism of the abstract character of much just-war theorizing is its portrayal of hostile forces as a one-dimensionally evil “Other.”14 As “Other,” the opposition can be perceived as inferior and “killable” alien beings, rather than as other humans sharing similar needs and desires. Although Walzer recognizes the role that this perception of the enemy as less than human plays in enhancing the willingness of human beings to kill one another (see, e.g., Walzer 1977, 139-43), he fails to see the far-reaching implications of this for the possibility of negotiating alternatives to armed conflict, or for assessing the morality of particular conflicts.

Along with other militarist thinking, Ruddick condemns just-war theory’s dependence on a conception of ‘’enemies’ abstract enough to be killable” (Ruddick 1989, 150), a conception in which “human bodies are subordinated to abstract causes, [and] different bodies are organized around abstract labels of civilian or soldier, ‘the enemy’ or ally, us or them” (146). Moral theorist Nel Noddings considers this problem to be more prevalent among men than women, since females are socialized in a way which emphasizes relationality and connection more than separation and autonomy (Noddings 1989, 202).

A third aspect of abstraction that has troubled feminists about just-war thinking is its privileging of abstract concepts of rights and justice over and above those of love and caring (e.g., Gilligan 1982; Noddings 1984). For Augustine, war is just when necessary to counter injustice and restore peace, regardless of the relative equities in the conflict (Augustine 1984, 862). For Walzer, going to war is only justified in order to defend rights to life and liberty.
(Walzer 1977, 135). And in the normal course, the practice of war is just only when it does not violate human rights (135). Elshtain specifically criticizes Walzer's theory of rights as a foundation for determining the morality of war, contending that the application of a rights-based approach to the bombings of Hiroshima is "impoorished" and "inadequate to describe what happened on those dreadful days" (Elshtain 1985, 47).

Many feminists reject such an emphasis on rights and justice as relying on male-derived and biased conceptions that fail to accord with the way human beings are actually constituted (e.g., Shanley 1983, 360; Shaughnessy 1988, 11). Feminist legal theorist Joan Shaughnessy argues that a focus on rights fails "to recognize that people do not exist in isolation, but rather within a complex, imperfect social structure" (Shaughnessy 1988, 12). According to Gilligan, moral theories based on individual rights and justice promote relations of separation rather than connection. Separation is more likely to lead to alienation, and ultimately to war, since the origins of aggressiveness lie in the failure of connection. In her view, whereas "male" approaches are based on rights and justice, "female" approaches proceed on the basis of nonviolence (Gilligan 1982, 173-74). Again, even if one does not accept the gendered aspects of these criticisms, they nonetheless suggest that the tendency to abstract thinking among just-war theorists makes the resort to armed force more likely.

Dichotomized Thinking. Although not in the criteria themselves, the application of just-war theory reflects a dualistic hierarchy of values privileging male over female, the "spiritual" over the "earthly," and the "State" over the "Individual." This dualism is readily evident in Augustine's validation of practices in the earthly sphere which he condemns in the heavenly (including war), on the basis that these spheres constitute "two cities" governed by different sets of laws (see Augustine 1984, 877-78). Like Augustine, Niebuhr privileges the individual's relationship with an abstract, transcendent God over relationships with other persons. Noddings characterizes this tendency as fostering separation and lack of connection between persons (see Noddings 1989, 200-201, 204).

Feminists have also argued that such dualism privileges abstract spiritual conceptions over practical earthly ones, and devalues the significance of "this world" and its inhabitants (see, e.g., McFague 1987). Ruddick, for example, believes that the tendency to abstraction in just-war theory is fueled by Christianity's eschatological focus, which separates the "inner" spiritual life from the "outer" material one (Ruddick 1989, 134-36). Elshtain also objects to the dualisms of "good and evil" and "just and unjust" in official just-war rhetoric, which she claims is unable to restrain judges from becoming executioners under conditions of total war (Elshtain 1987, 157).

One of Elshtain's main criticisms of just-war theory is its dualistic discourse of gender, which designates women as "beautiful souls" in opposition to the just Christian (male) warrior (Elshtain 1985, 45). This gendered split operates
to constitute women as “civic cheerleaders”, a “collective Other” in opposition to which men can be virilized as warriors (Elshtain 1985, 42-43). This split continues to operate in contemporary just-war theory, including that of the U.S. Catholic Bishops (see Segers 1985, 642). Elshtain also criticizes the way just-war theory dichotomizes war and peace because it leads to a conception of peace as simply the absence of war rather than a “chastened patriotism” which would restrain thinking in warist terms. As Cohn notes, such attitudes about peace tend to confirm rather than belie the warist presumption that peace is “soft-headed” (Cohn 1989b, 128).

Relationship of the Individual to Authority. One hierarchalized dichotomy in particular that all three just-war theories discussed here reflect is a privileging of the state over the individual, which justifies allowing the innocent to die for the “social good.” Both Augustine and Niebuhr place a premium on social order and political stability. For Augustine, this counsels passive obedience to secular authority (Augustine 1984, 870). For Niebuhr, social order may sometimes outweigh the obligation to pursue justice, because “contemporary war places so many moral values in incalculable jeopardy” (Niebuhr and Dun 1955, 78; Niebuhr 1956, 44).

Although Walzer purports to give primacy to individual rights, there is a tension in his just-war theory between the rights of individuals and the rights of community. State’s rights—to territorial integrity and political sovereignty—can sometimes legitimately override individual rights in defense of communities (Walzer 1977, 253). His theory allows an exception to the ordinary protection of individual rights for cases of “supreme emergency,” when an imminent grave emergency to one’s own people exists, as well as in the case of individual soldiers, who, Walzer argues, give up their rights when they enlist or agree to be conscripted.

The privileging of authority in just-war theory also increases the risk that individuals will be viewed only instrumentally, as means sacrificed to the end of the state’s winning the war (see Davis 1987, 475). This is especially evident in Augustine’s view that the decision to undertake war is one for the monarch, not the individual soldier. Civil disobedience and selective conscientious objection are illegitimate (see Langan 1984, 31). Similarly, in Walzer’s view, since soldiers lose their human rights “simply by fighting” (Walzer 1977, 136), soldiers are a kind of “other” who can be freely sacrificed. This objectification makes it easier to justify taking the lives of soldiers, whether through wholesale slaughter of enemy troops, or the use of large numbers of one’s own soldiers sacrificed kamikaze style, and may actually risk the expansion and escalation of hostilities.

Feminists are critical of such privileging of the state. Ruddick criticizes just-war’s “unquestioning obedience as a virtue” (Ruddick 1989, 114). Similarly, Elshtain proposes that the discourse of “armed civic virtue” dominating just-war thinking needs to be replaced with a “politicized” discourse that
“questions and is suspicious of authority” (Elshtain 1987, 258). Feminists have noted that conservative attitudes advocating maintenance of the status quo—evident in much traditional just-war thinking—are often used to perpetuate unequal social relations, especially in respect to women and racial minorities.

Further, some feminist moral theories are founded on interpersonal relations between individuals, suggesting a greater concern for individual welfare than for social order and stability. In Noddings’s theory of caring, for example, responsibilities to close relatives are primary, followed by an expanding, lessening degree of obligation toward those who are related less directly, through “circles and chains of caring” (see Noddings 1984; Gilligan 1982). These feminist critiques suggest that just-war theory’s general emphasis on the good of the social order at the expense of individuals is misplaced.

These criticisms of just-war theory demonstrate that it does not provide a satisfactory method for determining the morality of war for many feminists, at least as it has been applied traditionally. Yet, as the following discussion reveals, feminist efforts to provide alternative approaches are also inadequate.

FEMINIST ALTERNATIVES TO JUST-WAR THEORY

To date, there have been two notable nonpacifist feminist alternatives to just-war theory: Elshtain’s proposed “revitalized civic discourse” and Ruddick’s “maternal peace politics.” Elshtain proposes to reduce armed conflict by eliminating the paradigm of “armed civic virtue” that underlies realist and just-war approaches. This involves “devirilizing” war discourse (e.g., Elshtain 1985, 55) and retrieving “female-linked imagery.” It requires formulating an alternative discourse which can “problematize war narratives” and move beyond “the grand narrative of armed civic virtue” (Elshtain 1987, 251),16 with its gendered dichotomy of males as warriors and females as noncombatant peacemakers (Elshtain 1985, 50). In Elshtain’s estimation, this would give “men and women the opportunity to share risks as citizens, to take up nonviolence as a choice, not a given” (Elshtain 1987, 257).

It is not evident how Elshtain’s proposed “revitalized civic discourse” would be an improvement on just-war decision-making about the morality of U.S. involvement in recent conflicts. Women’s exemplary military performance in the Gulf War certainly broke down many traditional gender stereotypes about women’s ability to perform as soldiers under combat conditions, thus undermining the paradigm of armed civic virtue as an exclusively male domain. Yet breaking down this gender dichotomy does not seem to have altered the macho attitudes that led to U.S. involvement in the Gulf, or resulted in the indiscriminate killing of retreating Iraqi soldiers. Nor has it led to an enhanced role for women in policy-making on more recent conflicts, such as the war in Bosnia.
Thus, in the end, Elshtain's own proposal fails at the level of effecting practical decision-making. In addition, Elshtain fails to specify clearly how she would amend, supplement, or replace just-war theory, given her recognition that both just-war theory and realism have limited usefulness (Elshtain 1987, 248-49). Indeed, in her more recent work, she seems to embrace traditional just-war theory more completely and uncritically than earlier (cf., e.g., Elshtain 1991b, 134, with Elshtain 1987), offering it as a necessary antidote to the lack of in-depth moral theorizing about war by feminists.

Ruddick acknowledges that just cause for war may exist and some battles may be necessary, but she contends that “there are entirely or principally nonviolent ways of fighting them that are at least as effective as violence” (Ruddick 1983, 475-76). Ruddick’s proposed alternative to just-war theory is a “maternal politics of peace” based on “maternal thinking.” Maternal thinking is constituted by the virtues of “maternal practice”: preservative love, fostering nurturance, and training conscience and its latent peacefulness (Ruddick 1989, 40-56, 137). It requires that “peacemakers must invent myriad nonviolent actions and then name, describe and support them” (139), including nonviolent resistance (174-75). It also requires an ongoing attention to human suffering (157).

There are a number of fundamental problems with Ruddick’s proposal. First, although it avoids the realist trap of undue pessimism about human nature, it tends to fall into the opposite extreme of idealistically depicting mothers as basically caring toward their offspring, selflessly caring more for their children than for themselves, and presuming that nonmothers have similar caring capacities. Second, although she denies that her theory of maternal thinking is based on essentialist conceptions about women’s biological natures (see Ruddick 1989, 40-41, 157), her argument that women are more suited to promote peace than are men tends in this direction by resting on women’s capacity for, and experience of, being mothers (see Code 1991, 91-93).

Ruddick’s views tend to replicate the essentialist and dichotomizing tendencies in the work of “cultural” or “difference” feminists, who argue that relations of caring for others give women a “different moral voice” (e.g., Gilligan 1982; Noddings 1984). Ruddick asserts that such differences make females “naturally” more oriented to peace than war. Dichotomizing tendencies that Ruddick condemns in traditional just-war theory appear in her own contention that maternal practice promises distinctive resources for nonviolent alternatives to war because of the “prima facie opposition between maternal and military work,” that “mothering begins in birth and promises life” whereas “military thinking is characterized by its justification of organized, deliberate death” (Ruddick 1987, 247; Ruddick 1989, 148). Elshtain is critical of this type of move to “devirilize male discourse” by replacing it with a “feminized” one, arguing that “both embody dangerous distortions” (Elshtain 1987, 258).
Third, Ruddick's approach fails to develop its implications fully or in concrete terms and thereby demonstrate its feasibility. Her theory remains as abstract as the just-war tradition that she rejects. Her most specific claim is that "the practice of mothering taken as a whole" contributes to peace politics the qualities of attentiveness, realism and a positive attitude toward change (Ruddick 1989, 220). Contrary to her own theoretical principles, however, she fails to provide concrete, particular, non-abstract examples of when or how this nonviolent approach has or could succeed. She generally fails to provide an adequate connection between the private sphere of maternal practices involving relationships with one's own children and the public sphere of international relations between antagonistic, and often culturally alien, nation-states (Ruddick 1987, 57, 178, 254; see also Code 1991, 92-93).

Ruddick's proposed "maternal peace politics" also proves deficient when applied to the real life experience of the Bosnian conflict. When former friends and neighbors who lived together peacefully for years turn to rape and kill one another based on ethnic and religious differences, it is difficult to see how a "practice of mothering" could resolve the conflict. Nor can Ruddick's idealistic optimism about the power of maternal thinking to avert violent methods of resolving conflicts be viewed as reasonable in the light of some of the U.S.'s past military interventions, including the two World Wars.

This discussion suggests that neither Ruddick nor Elshtain have developed an alternative to just-war thinking which remedies the deficiencies in the tradition without contributing new problems. Ruddick and Elshtain do not hold an exclusive claim on feminist alternatives to traditional just-war theory. Nonetheless, the deficiencies in their attempts to replace traditional criteria suggest that the way to deal with traditional approaches may not be to eliminate them but to revise how they are applied.

A FEMINIST REVITALIZATION OF JUST-WAR THEORY

The feminist criticisms discussed do not suggest a need to develop radically new or different criteria for assessing the morality of engagement in armed conflict from those offered by traditional just-war theory. Rather, they are more focused on altering the way the traditional criteria have been applied in specific situations. To that end, feminist criticisms and counterproposals suggest a number of specific proposals for modifying the practice more than the theory of the just-war approach to armed conflict. These proposals are based on the positive dimensions of the just-war criteria already discussed rather than representing completely novel approaches.

As an initial matter, feminist criticisms suggest that just-war theory should not be premised on realist assumptions. This includes theologically derived conceptions of original sin and analogously pessimistic secular appraisals of human nature. Such negative conceptions tend to squelch consideration of
alternatives to war. However, unduly idealistic appraisals of human (particularly female) nature by some feminists such as Noddings and Ruddick are also inaccurate and unproductive. Prudence dictates that the long history and habit of human war-making must not be forgotten either.

Such a reconceptualized understanding of human nature would have at least two desirable consequences for just-war theory. Including females as well as males in “human nature” (see Tickner 1991, 37; Ruddick 1989; Elshtain 1987) would enable just-war theorists to consider the nonviolent historical practices and sentiments of women, leading to an understanding which would assume neither that the nature of human beings makes war inevitable nor completely unnecessary. In addition, such a revised understanding of human nature would permit greater opportunities for attempting nonviolent alternatives to armed conflict, without precluding consideration of the possibility that resort to war might be necessary.

A second major implication of feminist criticisms is that just-war theorists should pay more serious attention to pacifist arguments. As Cady has suggested, pacifism and just-war thinking are not radically opposed, but represent two different positions along the same continuum (Cady 1989, 35-37). The influence of pacifist perspectives would strengthen application of several just-war criteria. First, it would make “last resort” more significant in just-war deliberations, resulting in a greater effort to exhaust all reasonably effective alternatives to the use of armed force. Given their insistence on attending to the suffering of particular others, feminist applications of “last resort” might result in interpreting the preferability of alternatives to war in accordance with whether they result in less harm to the innocent (see McMahon 1991).

The emphasis on collaboration in much feminist theory could also be creatively applied to the development of new international or multinational frameworks for assessing if and when resort to armed force is morally necessary. However, these alternatives must be considered with an awareness of Walzer’s admonition that the “last resort” may never be reached, since some alternative always remains theoretically available, thus effectively making this criteria function to transform just-war theory into a form of pacifism.

A just-war theory chastened by pacifist influences would also involve strengthening the force accorded to the “proportionality” and “reasonable hope for success” requirements. This would entail replacing abstract and dualistic thinking with a more casuistical attention to context and particularity, what Elshtain characterizes as “the living textures within which limited human beings think and act” (Elshtain 1987, 189). As Alan Geyer recognizes, the U.S.’s involvement in the Persian Gulf War “no longer looks so justifiable once one begins examining in detail whether the facts warranted” the conclusion to go to war (Geyer 1991, 135).

In keeping with feminist concerns with bodies and individual suffering, application of “proportionality” and “reasonable hope for success” would
require a more comprehensive examination of the potential long-term consequences of contemplated intervention. Such considerations should highlight the impact on civilians. This includes not only their survival, but also the quality of their lives and relationships, particularly if the environment and/or vital links to food, water, and basic services are damaged or destroyed during the conflict. It also requires an assessment of the long-term prospects for peace and security in the surrounding region. As Elshtain and others have pointed out, just-war principles were heedlessly bandied about during the Gulf War to provide a justification for U.S. involvement, without careful attention to the many areas of uncertainty and ambiguity that existed (Elshtain 1992, 42).

A more nuanced approach to just-war theory would also give more attention to the requirements of “right intention” and “relative justice” than has been done in the past. Niebuhr’s caution against self-righteousness is echoed by Ruddick’s recognition that “being on the side of the good can foster a repressive self-righteousness that legitimates killing or, alternatively, condemns violence without attending to the despair and abuse from which it arises” (Ruddick 1989, 135). Elshtain similarly predicts that our “warlike way of thinking” cannot be altered until we abandon “grand teleologies of historical winners and losers,” “triumphalist accounts of our victories,” and “absolute moralisms” as part of our identities (Elshtain 1987, 256). Feminist concern for relationships could help temper these tendencies in just-war thinking.

In addition, feminist calls for a more particularized, contextualized, and individualized approach to war would involve a breakdown (or at least a radical reconfiguration) of the dichotomies between male and female, combatant and noncombatant, soldier and citizen, ally and enemy, and state and individual which have dominated just-war thinking. Rather than relying on traditional dichotomies, a feminist application of just-war criteria should emphasize the effects of going to war on the lives of the particular individuals who would be involved, whether soldier or civilian, enemy or ally, male or female.

A feminist application of just-war criteria in a situation like that of Bosnia, for example, would require military strategists to focus more closely on the relations between the warring factions than has been the case. Rather than concluding simply that intervention is inappropriate because none of the participants is completely innocent, a feminist analysis of the conflict would examine the relative equities of the parties, the balance of power, the history and cultures of the region, the specific conduct of each of the parties which led to and has maintained hostilities, the degree to which each party has complied with the war convention, including its treatment of innocent civilians, the prospects for a long-term settlement of hostilities through the use of armed intervention, the environmental impact of such intervention on the region, and so on. In particular, a feminist appraisal would consider the rape of Bosnian Muslim women by Serbian men as a serious war crime rivaling that of deliberately injuring or killing innocent civilians. Such a fine-grained
analysis and attention to human suffering would likely result in a determination that armed intervention, or at least additional military support for the Bosnian Muslims would be morally justified, despite a sturdy presumption against violence.

Finally, a feminist approach to just-war theory would entail reformulated understandings of the proper relationship between the individual and the state. It would consider both the impact of war on individuals as well as the obligations of both men and women to defend the nation. It should provide a formulation with which the merits of a particular military engagement may be assessed by the individual soldiers and civilians involved in it as well by the relevant “authorities.” In keeping with Elshtain’s criticisms, it would include a reassessment of women’s exemption from military combat and draft registration, as well as established laws governing conscientious objection and civil disobedience.

**Conclusion**

Feminist critiques have provided important challenges to several aspects of traditional just-war theory. The discussion of the just-war approaches of Augustine, Niebuhr, and Walzer from a feminist perspective reveals how weak and limited this tradition’s vision of alternatives to war often is, how distorted by realist and gender-biased assumptions, how abstract and life-denying its application can be. Yet, despite proficiency at pinpointing a number of significant problems with traditional just-war thinking, prominent feminist alternatives proposed to date are themselves deficient in a number of respects.

In addition, feminist criticisms and alternatives do not indicate any inherent deficiencies in the just-war criteria themselves. They focus on the underlying assumptions and problematic application of the theory, not the validity or appropriateness of the criteria. Feminist principles suggest several ways in which traditional approaches to just-war theorizing can be improved, leading to a more careful and considered appraisal of when the use of armed force is morally justified. Unless or until a feasible feminist alternative to the just-war criteria is developed, feminists should work to revitalize, rather than undermine, this long-standing approach to the morality of war.

**Notes**

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1. By “feminist,” I generally mean a critical perspective on the patriarchal and sexist dimensions of society oriented to improving the status of women.

2. These various perspectives on war can be conceptualized as located on a single continuum running from absolute pacifism on one side, through warism on the other, with various forms of pacifism, just-warism, and war realism aligned next to one another in between (Cady 1989, 35-37).

3. The association of women with peace and peace-movements is a long-standing one, extending back as far as the classical Greeks and Romans. See, e.g., Elshtain (1987, 139); Berkman (1990); Costin (1983). Many women’s groups organized in the early twentieth century had peace as a significant aspect of their agendas, including the Women’s Peace Union and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). In recent decades, women have continued to take the lead in mobilizing peace organizations worldwide. See Alonso (1993); Swerdlow (1989); Hunter (1991); Howes (1993); Reardon (1985, 86-87, 181).

4. Polls taken in relation to U.S. involvement in the Persian Gulf War indicate that this gap appears to be growing. In December, 1990, men were about equally divided regarding whether the United States should attack Iraq, whereas women opposed military action by 73 percent to 22 percent. Women similarly opposed surgical air strikes by 63 percent to 29 percent. Research indicates that men in many western countries tolerate aggressive stands on international and domestic public policy issues more readily than do women (Brock-Utne 1985, 33).

5. Cady points out that pacifism is sometimes rejected because it is wrongly identified as “passivism,” a passive and inactive response to aggression (Cady 1989, 11-12). Some women may reject pacifism based on the official views of a cultural, social or religious group, as was the case with the National Council of Catholic Women’s support for just-war doctrine between the two world wars (MacCarthy 1978, 27). Other women have rejected pacifism on realist grounds (Elshtain 1985, 42).


7. Duane Cady characterizes this presumption as “warism,” which he describes as leading to the abuse of certain just-war criteria, especially the in bello principles of discrimination and proportionality (Cady 1989, 66-69).

8. For Augustine, war is both the consequence of sin as well as a remedy for sin (see Miller 1991, 21). For Niebuhr, war is a necessary “lesser of two evils” in a sinful world, a reality that cannot be eradicated in the earthly realm, “a world in which egoism, collective and individual, will never be completely overcome” (Niebuhr 1933, 257). Niebuhr thus rejects, as contrary both to the New Testament and experience, views of “rationalists” who believe in the essential good of human beings (Niebuhr 1940, 6).

9. Richard Miller also criticizes the tendency of just-war theory to consider only war and not peace (Miller 1991, 122).

10. Despite Elshtain’s rejection of the pacifist label, this criticism accords with the view of technological or nuclear pacifists, who reject the notion of limited war as feasible in the light of the destructive potential of modern weaponry (see Cady 1989, chap. 4).

11. Their exclusive focus on the individual ethic of the love commandment ignores the sociopolitical duty to promote justice and is socially irresponsible (Niebuhr 1956, 31; 76). Niebuhr criticizes pacifism based on nonviolent resistance of the sort advocated by
Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. as a biblically heretical and disingenuous effort to found on love what actually amounts to power politics involving coercion (Niebuhr 1940, 10-11). However, Niebuhr does validate nonresistant pacifism of sectarian perfectionists as providing an important moral voice that may temper the tendencies of militarists to allow justice to eclipse love (Niebuhr 1940, 5, 25; see Miller 1991, 107).

12. In the City of God, "there will be no animal body to 'weigh down the soul' in its process of corruption; there will be a spiritual body with no cravings" (Augustine 1984, 878).

13. Ruddick considers such technostategic rationality as "only an extension, albeit a stunning one, of the abstractness that characterizes military discourse as a whole" (Ruddick 1989, 146).

14. Miller also discusses this view in just-war theory (1991, 59, 71, 235). Noddings suggests that this ability to construct killable enemies results from our projection of evil onto others without seeing how we are implicated (Noddings 1989, 193-99). Elshtain similarly argues that both realism and pacifism promote polarizing "masculine" tendencies that deny the violence inside ourselves and project it outward onto "the Other" (1985, 51).

15. Not all of Walzer's just-war thinking is similarly abstract and universalizing, however. He recognizes that the rules of war are not universally applicable because morality is always connected to a culture's tradition and history. Moral rules are necessarily shaped by reference to that community's particular, concrete experience of war (Walzer 1977, 24). However, this more particularist aspect of Walzer remains in tension with the centrality he accords to individual rights founded on abstract and generalized notions of justice.

16. Carol Cohn also turns to discourse as a way of destabilizing and interrupting prevailing approaches to war, claiming that deconstruction provides an important means of challenging the hegemony of strategic discourse as "the only legitimate language for publicly discussing nuclear policy" (Cohn 1989a, 137; see Cohn 1989b, 154-55).

17. In Ruddick's definition, mothering is not exclusive to women but includes any person who is responsible for and significantly involved in caring for the lives of children (Ruddick 1989, 40).

18. In this regard, Ruddick tends to slide from a recognition that the traditional identification of women with peace is a myth to an unsupported assertion that "women's distinctive peacefulness" has the potential to become "a reliable resource for peace" (Ruddick 1983, 479).

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