

David Rodin: Ethics of War & Conflict

Guiding Question:

Does a soldier act permissibly if he fights in an unjustified war?

Transcript:

One of the areas that I do a lot of work on is the ethics of war and conflict. One of the very significant developments that I and a number of other scholars have been teasing out over the last number of years is the question of why we should consider it to be the case that a soldier acts permissibly when he fights in a war that is not itself justified. Most people think that a soldier doesn't do wrong simply by fighting in a war, even if that war is an unjust one. Many people think that the war in Iraq was unjust, but they don't think that the soldiers who fought there did something wrong by doing that.

But when you think about it from the normative structure of interpersonal rights that I've been suggesting today, it's immediately obvious that there's something profoundly problematic and difficult about that idea. If a soldier is fighting in a war that is not justified, he's using lethal violence against other persons—let's say persons that are simply defending their state from an act of aggression. Those defending soldiers are presumably not doing anything wrong. They're offering harm to you, but they're offering harm that is justified, in precisely the same way that a victim engaging in self-defense is using justified harm. So how can it be the case that a soldier using force in this case is using force that is permissible?

I think this raises a really, really profound question and problem for the way that we think about the rights of soldiers, the way that we configure our militaries, the way that we think about the opportunities for conscientious objection, for example. So it's a different question, but a nevertheless important one.

Additional Critical Thinking Questions:

When is it permissible to fight?

What makes a war just?

What is conscientious objection? Should citizens be able to use this to avoid a draft?