

Narrative Destabilization of Just War: Augustine, Tolstoy, and the Limits of Conditional Justification

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Abstract:

This paper examines the moral justification of war through a comparative analysis of Augustine's *City of God* and Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Augustine develops a framework of conditional moral justification in which killing in war may be distinguished from murder when authorized by legitimate authority, undertaken for a just cause, governed by right intention, and directed toward the restoration of peace. This structure preserves the universality of moral prohibition while permitting exception under specific conditions. However, the coherence of this framework depends upon the stability of its underlying concepts. Through close textual analysis and comparative interpretation, this study demonstrates that Tolstoy's narrative systematically destabilizes these conditions. *War and Peace* reveals the fragmentation of authority, the ambiguity of just cause, the collapse of teleological order, and the moral disorientation experienced by individuals who participate in violence. By placing philosophical and literary modes of ethical inquiry in dialogue, the paper demonstrates that while Augustine renders war morally intelligible, Tolstoy exposes the fragility of that intelligibility within historical experience. The justification of war thus emerges as structurally unstable rather than conceptually resolved.

Keywords: Augustine, conditional justification, ethical literary criticism, just war theory, Tolstoy, War and Peace

1. Introduction

The moral justification of war presents one of the most enduring tensions in ethical and political thought. On the one hand, moral systems, particularly within the Judeo-Christian tradition, establish a clear prohibition against killing. On the other

hand, political communities have consistently claimed the right to wage war, enforce order, and employ violence under specific conditions. The resulting paradox lies not simply in the existence of violence, but in the attempt to reconcile organised killing with universal moral law.

Within the Western intellectual tradition, this tension finds its most influential articulation in the development of Just War theory. Although not systematically formulated by Augustine, his work *The City of God* provides the conceptual foundation for later theorists, such as Thomas Aquinas, to construct a formal doctrine. Augustine's approach does not reject the prohibition against killing; rather, it introduces a framework of conditional moral justification, in which violence may be rendered permissible when undertaken by legitimate authority, for a just cause, with right intention, and directed toward the restoration of peace.

Yet the coherence of this framework depends upon the stability of its underlying concepts. Authority must be legitimate, justice must be discernible, intention must be morally ordered, and peace must function as a meaningful teleological end. While philosophical discourse tends to treat these conditions as conceptually manageable, their application within historical reality remains far more complex. It is precisely this complexity that Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* brings into focus.

This study employs close textual analysis and comparative interpretation to examine the relationship between philosophical justification and narrative representation. By placing Augustine's conceptual framework in dialogue with Tolstoy's literary depiction of war, the analysis explores how different modes of inquiry engage the ethical problem of violence.

This paper argues that Augustine constructs a framework that preserves moral prohibition through structured exception, while Tolstoy's narrative reveals that the conditions that make such exception possible are structurally unstable. By depicting war as contingent, chaotic, and experientially disorienting, *War and Peace* challenges the coherence of Just War reasoning at the level of lived reality. The result is not the rejection of moral reasoning itself, but the exposure of its fragility when confronted with historical experience.

Literature Review

The ethical justification of war has generated extensive scholarship across theology, philosophy, and political theory. Augustine's *The City of God* provides the foundational framework for what later becomes Just War theory, particularly through its emphasis on legitimate authority, just cause, and right intention (Johnson 67; Mattox 89). Rather than justifying war as a positive good, Augustine situates it within a moral structure that preserves the prohibition against killing while permitting conditional exception (Johnson 52–72).

Scholars such as R. A. Markus emphasise the realism of Augustine's political thought, arguing that moral judgment operates within a fallen world characterised by uncertainty and imperfection (Markus 14–15). This perspective highlights the tension between ethical principles and historical conditions, a tension that remains central to Just War reasoning. The later systematisation of Augustine's insights by Thomas Aquinas further formalises these criteria, enabling their continued development within both theological and secular contexts.

In modern scholarship, Michael Walzer defends the continuing relevance of Just War theory, arguing that moral distinctions in war remain meaningful despite the complexities of contemporary conflict (Walzer 21). At the same time, critics caution that increasing formalisation risks transforming a framework of moral restraint into a mechanism of moral legitimisation (Johnson 72).

Parallel to these philosophical debates, literary scholars have explored the capacity of narrative to engage ethical questions in ways that differ from abstract theory. Martha Nussbaum argues that literature illuminates moral problems through the representation of lived experience, revealing dimensions of ethical life that resist generalisation (Nussbaum 39–41). This perspective has informed ethical literary criticism, which examines how narrative form shapes moral understanding.

Within this framework, Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* has been widely interpreted as a critique of conventional accounts of history and war. Isaiah Berlin characterises Tolstoy's philosophy of history as a rejection of teleological and deterministic explanations, emphasising instead the role of innumerable causes that resist systematic organisation (Berlin 30–34). Gary Saul Morson similarly highlights Tolstoy's use of multiple perspectives to disrupt simplified causal models (Morson

112–121), while George Steiner underscores his dismantling of heroic narratives of control and purpose (Steiner 189–192). Donna Tussing Orwin further destabilises the ethical dimension of Tolstoy's work, arguing that his characters' experiences of violence expose the inadequacy of abstract moral frameworks (Orwin 76–83).

Despite these contributions, relatively little scholarship has placed Augustine's Just War framework in sustained dialogue with Tolstoy's narrative critique. This paper addresses that gap by examining how Tolstoy's representation of war destabilises the conceptual conditions that underpin Augustinian moral justification.

2. Augustine and the Structure of Conditional Justification

Augustine's reflections in *The City of God* provide the conceptual foundations for the moral justification of war within the Christian tradition. Rather than offering a systematic doctrine, he develops a framework in which killing may be conditionally justified through distinctions grounded in authority, justice, intention, and teleology. This structure preserves the prohibition against killing while permitting an exception under specific conditions. Yet the very conditions that enable justification also introduce instability, as they depend upon fallible human judgment within a disordered world.

2.1 Killing and Moral Reclassification

Augustine's treatment of war begins with a fundamental conceptual shift: the moral status of killing is no longer determined solely by the act itself, but by the structure within which it occurs. In *The City of God*, Augustine argues that those who kill under divine command or lawful public authority do not violate the commandment against killing. Murder, therefore, is not simply the taking of life but the unlawful taking of life.

This distinction allows Augustine to preserve the universality of moral prohibition while permitting exceptions in practice. The moral status of killing is no longer determined solely by the act itself but by the structure within which the act is situated (Augustine I.21). Moral evaluation is thus relocated from the physical act to the legitimacy of the authority that commands it.

This move has significant implications. By grounding moral legitimacy in lawful authority, Augustine prevents the privatisation of violence. Private vengeance remains unequivocally condemned, while public violence becomes subject to moral

evaluation. Yet this relocation also introduces a structural dependency: the justification of killing now rests upon the justice of the authority that authorises it.

2.2 Justice and the Problem of Authority

Augustine complicates his own framework by insisting that authority must itself be grounded in justice. His famous assertion: “justice removed, then, what are kingdoms but great bands of robbers?” (Augustine IV.4), destabilises any simplistic appeal to political power. Authority alone does not justify violence; it must be oriented toward justice.

This introduces a layered structure of moral justification: Killing is justified by legitimate authority, which is itself grounded in justice, and justice, in turn, is measured against divine order.

Each layer introduces interpretive uncertainty. Political authority, as Augustine acknowledges, exists within a fallen world and is therefore susceptible to corruption. As a result, the distinction between legitimate rule and organised violence becomes precarious.

The moral differentiation between killing and murder thus depends upon conditions external to the act itself. If authority is unjust, then violence carried out under its command may be indistinguishable from criminal violence. The stability of moral justification is therefore contingent upon the integrity of political institutions that remain inherently fallible.

2.3 Teleology and the Tranquillity of Order

Augustine further renders war morally intelligible by situating it within a teleological framework. War is not justified as an intrinsic good but as a means to peace, defined as *tranquillitas ordinis*, the tranquillity of order (Augustine XIX.12). Violence becomes permissible insofar as it contributes to the restoration of a stable and just order.

However, this conception of peace introduces further complexity. For Augustine, peace is not merely the absence of conflict, but the proper ordering of relationships within a hierarchical structure (Augustine XIX.12). The moral legitimacy of war is therefore always provisional and instrumental. War is justified not by what it is, but by what it aims to achieve.

Yet this teleological orientation raises important questions. If peace is defined as an ordered hierarchy, then violence undertaken to preserve that hierarchy may be

justified even when the order itself is contested. The concept of peace thus becomes normatively loaded and potentially ambiguous.

2.4 Ethical Residue and the Tragic Dimension

Perhaps the most significant aspect of Augustine's framework is his refusal to present moral justification as a complete resolution. In his depiction of the "wise judge," Augustine acknowledges that even justified coercion produces moral anguish. The judge, compelled to act under conditions of uncertainty, remains morally troubled despite acting lawfully, revealing the persistence of ethical tension even within justified violence. Moral law is preserved through exception, yet the exception leaves ethical residue (Augustine XIX.6–7). This residue reflects the tragic dimension of political life. Violence may be necessary, but it is never morally pure.

This insight prevents Augustine's theory from collapsing into moral complacency. War may be justified under certain conditions, but it remains a response to sin and disorder rather than an expression of moral good. The contradiction between prohibition and necessity is not resolved but contained.

3. Tolstoy and the Narrative Destabilisation of War

While Augustine provides the conceptual framework for morally intelligible war, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* subjects that framework to experiential critique. Rather than engaging in abstract philosophical argument, Tolstoy employs narrative to expose the instability of the categories upon which Just War reasoning depends.

3.1 Authority and the Illusion of Command

One of the central pillars of Just War theory is the principle of legitimate authority. Augustine assumes that rulers possess both the right and the capacity to direct war toward just ends. Tolstoy challenges this assumption by depicting military command as largely illusory.

In *War and Peace*, decisions attributed to commanders dissolve within the chaotic movement of thousands of individuals, particularly in Tolstoy's depiction of the Battle of Borodino. The battlefield thus emerges as a space of decentralized action rather than coordinated control (Tolstoy 856).

Tolstoy's portrayal of Napoleon exemplifies this critique. Although traditionally regarded as a master strategist, Napoleon appears disconnected from the events he is supposed to direct. His orders often fail to influence the outcome of battle, revealing the limits of centralised authority.

This depiction undermines the ethical premise that authority can legitimise violence. If commanders cannot meaningfully control events, then the moral responsibility attributed to them becomes questionable. Authority remains symbolically significant, but its practical efficacy is diminished.

3.2 The Instability of Just Cause

Tolstoy further destabilises the principle of just cause by revealing the complexity of historical causation. Wars do not arise from clearly identifiable injustices but from a convergence of political, social, and historical forces.

In *War and Peace*, war appears as a historical phenomenon shaped by forces that exceed the moral frameworks designed to justify it. Competing narratives of justice emerge, each shaped by perspective and ideology (Tolstoy 1182).

This multiplicity of interpretations undermines the possibility of a singular and universally recognized just cause. What appears as a defensive necessity to one side may appear as unjust aggression to another. The moral clarity assumed by Just War theory dissolves into interpretive ambiguity.

3.3 History Without Teleology

Augustine's justification of war depends upon its orientation toward peace. Tolstoy challenges this teleological assumption by presenting history as fundamentally non-linear and unpredictable.

Events in *War and Peace* do not unfold according to coherent plans but emerge from the interaction of countless individual actions. As Tolstoy argues, historical outcomes result from "the combined action of many individuals" (Tolstoy 1182). What appears as a coherent and meaningful sequence of events in historical narratives is, in reality, experienced as confusion and unpredictability by those living through it.

This rejection of teleology has significant ethical implications. If war cannot reliably be directed toward meaningful ends, its justification as a means to peace becomes uncertain. Violence loses its moral intelligibility when its outcomes cannot be controlled or predicted.

3.4 Ethical Experience and Moral Disorientation

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of Tolstoy's critique lies in his depiction of individual moral experience. Rather than evaluating war through abstract principles, Tolstoy focuses on how individuals experience violence.

Characters such as Rostov, Andrei, and Pierre encounter killing not as a morally justified act but as a source of ethical disorientation. The act of taking a human life cannot be fully absorbed into the abstract categories that philosophical theories employ to justify it, revealing a gap between moral theory and lived experience (Tolstoy 1032).

This experiential perspective reveals a fundamental gap between philosophical justification and lived reality. Even when violence is institutionally sanctioned, individuals often experience it as morally troubling.

3.5 Narrative as Ethical Inquiry

Tolstoy's critique operates through narrative form rather than theoretical argument. By presenting multiple perspectives and emphasising the contingency of events, *War and Peace* exposes the limitations of philosophical frameworks.

Narrative exposes the limitations of philosophical frameworks when confronted with the lived complexity of historical experience. Literature thus functions as a mode of ethical inquiry, revealing tensions and ambiguities that abstract reasoning often seeks to resolve or overlook (Nussbaum 39–41).

4. Discussion: Moral Intelligibility and Practical Instability

The dialogue between Augustine and Tolstoy reveals a fundamental tension at the heart of Just War theory. Augustine renders war morally intelligible by introducing structured conditions: legitimate authority, just cause, right intention, and teleological orientation, under which violence may be justified. However, Tolstoy's narrative systematically destabilises each of these conditions when confronted with historical experience.

First, Augustine's emphasis on legitimate authority presupposes that political and military leaders possess the capacity to direct violence toward just ends. Tolstoy, however, portrays authority as largely illusory. In *War and Peace*, particularly in the depiction of the Battle of Borodino, Napoleon's commands fail to determine the course of events, as the battle unfolds through the fragmented and uncoordinated actions of thousands of soldiers. Tolstoy emphasizes that no single individual directs the battle, and that its outcome emerges from the collective movement of innumerable participants rather than from centralized command (Tolstoy 856). Decisions attributed to commanders thus dissolve within the chaotic movement of individuals, revealing a fundamental disjunction between the appearance of authority and its

actual efficacy. Authority persists symbolically, but its practical capacity to justify violence is fundamentally undermined.

Second, the principle of just cause depends upon the possibility of identifying a clear and morally defensible reason for war. Tolstoy challenges this assumption by revealing the multiplicity of perspectives through which war is interpreted. In *War and Peace*, the same conflict is understood differently by various actors: Russian characters frame the war as a necessary defense of their homeland, while French participants experience it as part of a broader imperial movement. Tolstoy's narrative structure refuses to privilege any single perspective, instead presenting these competing interpretations as equally contingent upon historical position and ideological commitment. Competing narratives of justice thus emerge, none of which can claim universal validity, thereby undermining the possibility of a singular and stable just cause (Tolstoy 1182).

Third, Augustine's framework relies on a teleological orientation in which war is justified as a means to peace. Tolstoy destabilizes this structure by presenting history as non-linear and unpredictable. In *War and Peace*, particularly in his reflections on the Napoleonic campaigns, Tolstoy rejects the idea that events unfold according to coherent plans, arguing instead that outcomes arise from the combined actions of countless individuals, none of whom possesses a comprehensive understanding of the whole (Tolstoy 1182). What later appears as a purposeful sequence of events is, in reality, experienced as confusion and contingency. The coherence of history is thus imposed retrospectively rather than guiding action in real time. As a result, the justification of war in terms of its outcomes becomes fundamentally uncertain.

Finally, Augustine's model presumes that moral evaluation can be sustained through right intention. Tolstoy's focus on individual experience, however, reveals a fundamental gap between abstract justification and lived reality. In *War and Peace*, characters such as Pierre and Prince Andrei encounter violence not as a morally ordered act but as a source of ethical disorientation. Pierre's confrontation with suffering and execution exposes the limits of moral reasoning grounded in abstraction, while Andrei's reflections on battle dismantle the illusion of purposeful and heroic violence. These experiences suggest that the act of killing cannot be fully

integrated into the conceptual frameworks that seek to justify it, thereby undermining the sufficiency of right intention as a condition of moral legitimacy (Tolstoy 1032). The conceptual architecture of Just War theory thus remains internally coherent, but its application becomes unstable when subjected to the contingencies of historical and experiential reality. This does not invalidate moral reasoning about war; rather, it reveals that such reasoning operates within conditions of structural fragility. Moral judgment persists, but without the certainty that philosophical frameworks seek to provide.

5. Conclusion

The moral justification of war remains an unresolved problem. Augustine's framework preserves ethical discourse by introducing conditional justification, allowing violence to be understood within a moral context while maintaining the prohibition against killing. By grounding justification in authority, justice, intention, and teleology, Augustine renders war morally intelligible without fully resolving its ethical tension. Yet Tolstoy's narrative reveals the limits of this framework when confronted with the complexity of historical experience, exposing the instability of the conditions upon which such justification depends. What appears conceptually coherent becomes increasingly difficult to sustain when examined through the lived realities of war.

War cannot be fully reconciled with moral understanding. It resists the categories through which philosophy seeks to regulate it, as lived experience exceeds the conceptual structures designed to contain it. Tolstoy's depiction of fragmented authority, competing narratives of justice, and unpredictable historical outcomes demonstrates that the conditions required for moral justification cannot be consistently maintained in practice. The prohibition against killing survives, but only through exception; justification persists, but only under conditions of instability. Moral reasoning is therefore not invalidated, but it is rendered uncertain and contingent.

The contradiction at the heart of Just War theory is not overcome; it is sustained through the tension between moral principle and historical reality. Augustine provides a framework that makes war morally thinkable, but Tolstoy reveals the limits of that framework when tested against experience. The ethical problem of war thus remains unresolved, not because moral reasoning fails entirely,

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but because it cannot fully account for the complexity of human action in history. Justification endures, but only within a structure that remains fundamentally fragile.

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