

Armed conflicts, like other tragedies of great scope, become objects of moral deliberation and evaluation. They also force us to act, especially when, as currently in Poland, they affect us directly. When does all this evil come from? Should we help and how can we help? Does anything go in warfare? Is it permissible to remain indifferent? The ethics of armed conflict attempts to answer these and other questions. Some of these queries are eternal; some have emerged only recently with technological and civilizational developments. Each new conflict engenders a new perspective on old and novel dilemmas; each shows us the darkest and best sides of humanity. My project addresses some of the most important questions that arise in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I try to make it reflect a vision of philosophy in the importance and usefulness of which I firmly believe – the hard, painfully practical work of facing the world's most difficult problems. I selected four.

Conscription is maximally controversial, and for good reasons. Accustomed to our freedoms, caring most for our loved ones, we see ourselves by their side, and instinctively revolt at the thought that the state could order us to leave them and take a place in some trench. Usually, we instinctively adopt the perspective of the conscript, but this is not the only perspective to be had. Ethicists tend to look at a problem from the perspective of the worst off. In wartime, frontline soldiers and defenseless civilians, fully exposed to the horrors of war, constitute the worst off. Is conscription an evil from their perspective? Or does it seem just and fair? Is it possible to distribute the burdens of national defense in such a way that no one stands defenseless in the face of foreign violence, and at the same time no one has to be forced to take on years of hard military service with a high risk of death or disability? If such a possibility exists, it is worth finding, describing and implementing.

Are we perhaps the baddies? In the context of the Ukrainian-Russian war, the answer is an obvious “no”, but this is a rare case. Wars are rarely so black and white. Much more often we see shades of gray or “we are waiting for you, red plague, to spare us the black death ...”. The ethics of war developed a comprehensive set of rules for deciding the matters of war justice for use by top decision-makers over the centuries. Yet it has not taken care of the needs of rank-and-file soldiers or ordinary citizens - after all, not so long ago they could only do what they were told. In today's world, however, we have many opportunities to act (or refrain from acting) as individuals – and rules developed for generals and presidents will not do. As part of the project, I will try to answer the question of when an ordinary person can take part in or support the war effort – and when this is impermissible.

Since we are on the good side – does anything go? The ethics of war answers with a hard “no” – attacks on civilians, abuse of prisoners of war and many other acts of unnecessary violence are wrong regardless of which side commits them. On the other hand, especially when threatened with physical annihilation or virtual enslavement, we begin to reach for every possible weapon and use every possible advantage. In such desperate need, are the victims of aggression really allowed to do more? Where is the limit? Perhaps nothing justifies violence against innocents - but what about a cyberattack on a bank or a drone strike on a state-owned refinery financing the enemy regime? The Russo-Ukrainian War provides many such cases, and I will try to sort out our sometimes contradictory intuitions about them.

Maybe the pacifists are right after all and we must never wage war, even in self-defense? The arguments of the pacifists never convinced me, but neither do the pacifists stop coming up with novel arguments. I am taking on the latest of these - the argument from opportunity cost. Every action has such a cost - the cost of the best thing one did not do, because doing the two things at once was not possible. We can either have a cake or eat it, either fight a war to defend the wrongly invaded, or deliver a hundred times more effective humanitarian aid to people who need it just as badly – so argue proponents of this new form of pacifism. Would it really be better if, instead of sending military aid to Ukraine, we helped children with malaria or the victims of recent floods? Such thinking seems to me naive and, to put things mildly, not that helpful, but when we do philosophy we have to thoroughly justify and interrogate our intuitions. It is better to do it as soon as possible, before an erroneous but seemingly attractive view becomes popular.

What if it turns out that some other problem is even more important than these four? I have left myself room to work on one if I come to such a conclusion. Unfortunately, we are not about to run out of ethical problems related to armed conflict. I will try to make sure that there will also be no shortage of sober, rational yet compassionate thinking about these.