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How Philosophy Contributes to the Analysis of War and Peace

An Interview With Professor John (Jack) Kultgen

By Anastacia Schulhoff

Anastacia (A): Your peace studies course, Philosophies of War and Peace, is a philosophy course. How does the discipline of philosophy aid in the analysis of war and peace?

Jack (J): In the case of my course on philosophical theories of war and peace, I hope to equip students to think critically when they face questions like, Should our nation go into this war? Should I participate? If I find myself involved, how should I conduct myself? Philosophers try to think critically about the ultimate reasons for what we do. And when we find that intelligent people disagree on some matter, we try to see what difference their different perspectives make.

A: Reasons often given for fighting in a war include to defend your family and give what you owe to your country. How do such reasons stand up to philosophical reasoning?

J: As for defending your family, I do believe you have primary duties to those near and dear to you. In situations such as war, you ought to put those duties ahead of duties to others, most of whom you do not even know. Your duties to those near and dear don’t always trump your duties to other people. You shouldn’t, for instance, take another person’s life to make your daddy proud of you or anything like that. In my own life, I try to figure out how to get the right balance between duties to family and duties to outsiders. For help, I have studied various approaches to ethics and found that each has a lot to say, but I don’t agree with all of them, and so I adopt what some have to say and ignore others.

A: Okay. That illustrates how one might decide whether to fight in a war for his or her loved ones. What about patriotism?

J: One issue I raise at the beginning of my course is, what is patriotism? Does it mean that you should support everything that the government decides to do in the name of the country? Everybody agrees that we should support our troops when we send them into harm’s way, but I ask students to reflect on what this means. Some people say that to support the troops you’ve got to support their mission whatever it is, because it will destroy morale if you’re critical. But is that what “true” patriotism requires? Or does it obliterate—us to question what the government is doing even when a war is underway?

A: How are we to judge what we’re supposed to do? Can philosophy help us make those judgments?

J: I certainly believe so. But as it turns out, philosophers differ on how to go about it. I myself am a consequentialist. That is, I try to judge actions and practices in terms of the consequences that they’re going to have. In most cases, and certainly in the case of war, this involves consequences for a large number of human beings, most total strangers. And that means that I have to make judgments about what’s important to them and to human beings as such.

Is your life important to you? Is a certain amount of property and comfort, is that important to you? Some amusement, some diversion? A satisfying job? A job that contributes to other people and not just to yourself? You should make a list of your basic values. That’s one thing you have to do if you’re going to discuss questions about how to live with someone. You have to establish whether he or she has the same values as you do. And then you can worry about how to achieve those values.

A lot of what philosophers do is clarify the commitments people make and to get them put into words and stated adequately.

A: There was an article in The Chronicle of Higher Education the other day, “Robots at War: Scholars Debate the Ethical Issues” (chronicle.com/article/Moral-Robots-the-Future-of/?cid=wc&utm_source=wc&utm_medium=en). This article suggests another line of philosophical reasoning that analyzes rights rather than consequences.

J: That’s right. The text that I use in my Philosophy of War and Peace course formulates moral questions about war in terms of rights—human rights—to show why certain kinds of states have rights, e.g., to sovereignty and territory. The author argues that the people of a

In his Philosophy of War and Peace class, Professor Kultgen discusses the moral issues raised by military missions.

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I realized the shoes are a pair of sandals my dad got me along when I was oldstyle/six.oldstyle/one.oldstyle/. The way this issue is generally handled is to talk about different senses of peace. “Peace” in the negative sense is simply an absence of violence. It is not necessarily the presence of harmony or cooperation or other such good things. And certainly not the presence of justice. Some of the most peaceful places are where everybody but the ruler is a slave.

Your question is a good one because it leads me to clarify that when I’m talking about peace and how wonderful it is, I have in mind a community in which everyone treats one another justly. One in which people go beyond justice to sympathy and compassion, but at a minimum everyone is treated justly.

Unfortunately justice is violated so frequently. That is where the idea of a just war comes into play. A just war is a war that establishes or restores justice. The technical term used by those who believe in just wars is that they “vindicate” human rights. Just wars are intended to achieve a peace in which everyone enjoys their rights and everyone respects the rights of other. Say the Hutus are committing mass murder of Tutsis in Rwanda, what does that mean to us? We have no connection with Rwanda, and it’s not our responsibility to take care of the Tutsis, yet human rights are being violated on a mass scale. Since the world can do something about it, they ought to do something about it.

A. Will teaching peace make peace happen in reality?
J. I can’t think of any other way I can contribute to making peace happen than to teach what I know about it. Wouldn’t you agree that if everyone thought about the way to world peace carefully and connected this goal to their other values, you would have many fewer wars going on? Certainly you would have less oppression and such things. Through my class I’m trying to spread a little light. That’s all I can do.

A: So, you believe in the value of enlightening education that liberates the mind.

J: Yes, indeed. And thinking about big abstract questions is only part of that. Also included, certainly, is literature—seeing concrete situations of the world in dramatic form, and living vicariously—that’s important. Studying history, studying what we know about how societies work. You need a lot of knowledge from different disciplines if you’re going to be a good citizen and live a satisfying life. Philosophers are just the big connectors—we try to connect everyone with everyone else and with everything in the world around them.

Voices of Peace Studies

Emily Henry graduated in May with a bachelor’s degree in international studies and an emphasis in peace studies.

“I developed a desire to travel when I was six and my father returned from a trip to Peru,” she says. “His trips became an annual event, and after a great deal of persuading, he agreed to take me along when I was 16. My favorite shoes are a pair of sandals my dad got for me at a market in Lima, Peru. They are super comfortable, and the weaving is detailed and beautiful. I realized on that trip that I not only wanted to travel but that I had a passion for social justice.”

“When I came to college my major was a no-brainer. I knew I wanted to make the kind of difference that the Peace Studies Program teaches, and I knew that I wanted to make those changes not only nationally but internationally.”

“Things about Mizzou that I’ll definitely miss when I’m no longer here? I will miss the beauty of Mizzou’s campus and all the opportunities you have as a student to listen to amazing speakers like Carl Wilkens or Gen. Roméo Dallaire!”

Nourah K. Shuaibi has declared a major in interdisciplinary studies with an emphasis in peace studies.

“I have taken many peace studies classes and have learned more than I could imagine. Well after my courses are over, I find myself researching more about the scholars I was introduced to. I can truly say that I am enjoying this major.”

“The Arab Spring is one of many examples that demonstrate how many countries need expertise in spreading peace.”

Lindy Hern, MA ‘05, PhD ’12, sociology, formerly the instructor of Peace Studies 1050 during 2011–12, is now teaching in Indiana at Manchester University, which began one of the nation’s first peace studies institutes in 1948. Hern writes: “My experience designing and teaching Peace Studies 1050 was very rewarding due to the enthusiasm of the students and the support of the peace studies community at Mizzou. I loved working with students and faculty who had a shared interest in creating a more peaceful and empowering world.”