

# Editorial: The Just War

In 1948, at about the time of the founding of the United Nations, Michael Oakeshott wrote in an essay appropriately entitled 'The Tower of Babel' that 'in a world dizzy with moral ideals we know less about how to behave in public and private than ever before'. In 2003 we have still the United Nations, itself the fruit of a dizzying moral ideal, and we also have a dizzying array of ideals.

Over the recent Iraq war, both the United Nations and moral dizziness were prominent; to those without certainty in advance of the action neither contributed to clarity about how we should behave. There were indeed those who sincerely and thoughtfully demonstrated against the war in various Western capitals who then, equally sincerely and thoughtfully changed their minds during or after the action; and perhaps, if this was so, in those of whom it were true, it demonstrated a degree of humility before the facts greater than was evident in some of those who were always adamant on one side or another.

And what did philosophers have to contribute? Opinions, to be sure, and philosophers are rarely short of opinions. But to what extent were these opinions the fruit of specifically philosophical reflection? To what extent should they have been? Should we expect philosophy to provide recipes for the solution of complicated and contested public questions? But if we don't expect this, and if we can give philosophical reasons for not expecting this, then philosophers have no more standing in these matters than any other segment of society.

In so far as philosophy did play a part in public discussion of the war, and it surely did and not just among professional philosophers, it tended to be a rehearsal of the just war doctrine of Aquinas and Suarez. We had the interesting spectacle of figures for whom scholastic views on usury or sexuality or divine retribution would be little more than medieval barbarism earnestly discussing the minutiae of the conditions for **ius ad bellum** and **ius in bello** as if they had been pronounced by Gandhi or Nelson Mandela, or had the sanctity of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.

More to the point philosophically is the question as to whether a doctrine developed in the context of wars fought with medieval weapons and by comparatively small professional armies can have straightforward application in the context of modern weaponry, modern terrorism and the democratic assumption of a whole people

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being at war. Nor in the just war doctrine is there any conception of a war fought for humanitarian reasons. In discussing these questions philosophers surely would have a proper role to play, as philosophers, but it has been a discussion conspicuous by its reticence.