Categorical Imperative  
Negative Case by Nathaniel Braswell



This case expounds on the distinction between a pragmatic justification and a moral one. Using Immanuel Kant’s Categorical Imperative as its moral framework, this case posits that preemptive warfare will never be morally justified, even though it is sometimes advantageous. The thesis of this argument is not that preemptive warfare should never be utilized to save lives, but simply that it is not *morally* a good thing. To use an example, some claim that although atomic bombs helped to win WWII, they were still immoral because of their deadly footprint on innocent Japanese civilians. Essentially, the bombs were not morally justified but were still pragmatically justified because of the need for an Allied victory in the war.

In order to run this case well, an understanding of the Categorical Imperative is essential. This theory, founded by Immanuel Kant, states that if something is moral once, it will always be moral in the future.[[1]](#footnote-1) In other words, it posits that if lying is immoral in one circumstance, it will never be morally justified in any other circumstance. In response to the theory, many have brought up that if a lie would save someone’s life, that lie would consequently become morally justified. However, while that argument sounds reasonable, it falls victim to the dangerous idea that the end justifies the means. If the consequences of an action determine its morality, then morality becomes obsolete, because actions will often have unforeseen consequences not detectable at the time. Even though that’s an effective response, it would be very wise to do additional research on the Categorical Imperative and arguments against it before deciding to run this case. While there is certainly some controversy about the legitimacy of the Categorical Imperative, it is still a creative moral framework that, if defended masterfully, will serve you well in debate rounds.

However, in running this case, it is vital to understand that the Categorical Imperative does not alone disprove the resolution; it only provides a framework that makes disproving it easier. Once you defend Kant’s theory, you must then explain why preemptive warfare is conceptually immoral, despite its positive results. You are *not* claiming that preemptive warfare doesn’t achieve useful benefits; you are arguing that those benefits don’t make the action itself moral. To put it another way, you are claiming that the results of something do not necessarily justify the means used to achieve it. I could become rich by robbing a few banks, but just because I choose to give that money to the poor doesn’t make that theft moral. The consequences of an action do not determine its morality.

The main difficulty with this case will be simplifying it for the judge. It’s easy to use big terms such as “deontological ethics” or “consequentialism,” but speaking that language will only hurt the narrative you are trying to construct. Before each tournament, figure out new ways to express your ideas in simple language while still maintaining their logical legitimacy. If you do that successfully and diligently research these moral theories, this case will be hard to beat.

Categorical Imperative

Ernest Hemingway once wrote, “Never think that war, no matter how necessary, nor how justified, is not a crime.” In order to prevent unnecessary war and avoid unjust aggression, I urge you to negate today’s resolution and stand against justifying preemptive warfare.

# Definitions

To clarify the round, let’s present a few definitions

**Preemptive Warfare** is defined by the United States Army War College as, “A war initiated on the basis of expectation and/or evidence that an enemy attack is imminent.”

**Morally Justified** is defined by Oxford English Dictionaries as something that is, “Done for or marked by a good or legitimate reason.”

# Value

I accept my opponent’s value of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and agree that it is an important ideal that is worth protecting. However, I disagree that the achievement of it automatically guarantees moral legitimacy. For instance, national security is invaluable but despite the fact that Nazi Germany was relatively secure, their means of achieving that security was not morally justified. It is my contention that preemptive warfare is not a morally justified means of achieving \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

[Note: Do not use the above rhetoric if their value is something like morality or political legitimacy. In these cases, just accept the value and claim that they do not uphold it.]

## Criterion: Categorical Imperative

The criterion I will be using is the Categorical Imperative. The Categorical Imperative is a moral theory that claims if something is immoral once, it will always be immoral in the future. Essentially, it posits that an action’s morality does not change with its consequences.

To use an example, I can get rich by robbing a bank, but if I use that money to feed the homeless, that does not mean my theft now becomes moral. The consequences of that robbery did not change the action’s morality. Therefore, the inherent nature of an action is the only metric for morality, and I believe that the nature of preemptive warfare is immoral, even if its pragmatically advantageous.

# Contention 1: Preemptive warfare is inherently immoral

There’s no doubt that war is an inevitable byproduct of human nature; however, most of today’s civilizations have commonly accepted a few guidelines about how to fight wars morally. These standards are generally referred to as the “Just War Theory.” One of these guidelines, according to Mount Holyoke College, is that

“A just war can only be fought to redress a wrong suffered. For example, self-defense against an armed attack is always considered to be a just cause.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Additionally, according to the United Nations, another commonly accepted standard is that the violence used in the war must be proportional to the injury suffered.[[3]](#footnote-3)

However, the very nature of preemptive war is antithetical to these two principles of just war. First, a preemptive strike anticipates a potential wrong instead of redressing a wrong that has already been suffered. There is very rarely any accurate way of assessing whether or not wrong will be done, leaving the potential damage up to speculation. More importantly, there is no way to ensure that the violence used is proportional to the injury if no injury has been suffered. There is simply no way to fit preemptive warfare under these commonly accepted principles of just war, meaning it is morally unjustified and immoral, regardless of the tactical benefits it might provide us.

Now let’s look at some of the arguments under the Affirmative case.

Opposing This Case

The first step to refuting this case is defeating the Categorical Imperative. In his book, *Utilitarianism,* John Stuart Mill offers some very powerful responses to this theory and the accompanying theory of deontological ethics. While I wouldn’t suggest going so far as to endorse utilitarianism, you can certainly make some effective arguments as to why preemption’s advantages make it morally justified.

Another approach you can take to respond to the Categorical Imperative is highlighting the difference between individual ethics and political ethics. As an individual, the livelihood and wellbeing of my fellow American citizens is not my responsibility. However, the government is morally obligated to protect the civilian population, meaning that they have different duties as an institution. If the government does something in order to save its citizens’ lives, it is acting on its moral obligation and thus that action is morally justified. Under this framework, the morality of a government’s action isn’t based on the consequences of that action; rather it’s based on the moral duty that a government has to its people.

In responding to the contention, you can either attack the credibility of the Just War theory or try to find loopholes in it. An example of a loophole would be that the theory says war must be in response to a wrong, but it doesn’t say that the wrong has to be physical. It could be a verbal wrong or even a potential wrong as well. Essentially the word “wrong” is vague, and it doesn’t necessarily exclude preemptive warfare.

This negative case is pretty logical in nature, and doesn’t really have that much emotional impact. A powerful rebuttal would be one that focuses on the real-world impact to eliminating preemption from our national security strategy. While some of it will depend on judge preference, the impact-based approach is probably your best bet as affirmative.

1. "Categorical Imperative | Philosophy." Encyclopedia Britannica. N. p., 2017. Web. 28 July 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. "Just War Principles." Mtholyoke.edu. N. p., 2017. Web. 29 July 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. "Just War And The Responsibility To Protect: Developments In UN Peacekeeping And Humanitarian Intervention | Acronym Institute." Acronym.org.uk. N. p., 2017. Web. 29 July 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)