The Ethics of Abandoning Peace  
Philosophies of the Resolution by Zachary Beddingfield



Source: <https://www.commondreams.org/news/2014/11/25/legacy-war-obama-quietly-hiking-us-troop-numbers-afghanistan>

Psychologist Sigmund Freud once wrote to Albert Einstein in a letter regarding conflict and war: “Conflicts of interest between man and man are resolved, in principle, by the recourse to violence.”[[1]](#footnote-1) In Freud’s view, mankind in their primitive state leap, by fate of human nature alone, directly to violence. However, Freud did not believe humans were doomed to war:

How long have we to wait before the rest of men turn pacifist? Impossible to say, and yet perhaps our hope that these two factors – man’s cultural disposition and a well-founded dread of the form that future wars will take – may serve to put an end to war in the near future.

This year’s NCFCA Lincoln Douglas resolution provides a unique challenge for debaters: In the past, Lincoln Douglas resolutions have left debaters free to argue the effectiveness of individual policies, using examples and statistics to prove their claims. This year, debaters must prove not that preventive warfare works, but that Preventive Warfare is *ethical*. To help prepare you to meet that challenge, this article will be divided into two sections. The first, *The Study of Ethics*, will provide an introduction to the philosophies on determining ethics in a vacuum. The second section, *Ethics in Context – Is Preventive Warfare Justified*, will consider the philosophy of preventive warfare and weigh this against the various theories discussed in Section One.

# The Study of Ethics

The Resolution states “Preventive Warfare is Ethical.” Here lies the problem: In 5000+ years of study[[2]](#footnote-2), no one has been able to fundamentally prove what “Ethical” means. All the same, you will need to: a) Give a framework through which to determine if something is ethical and b) Argue for why Preventive Warfare meets/fails the standard of that framework. The first half of this article aims at helping you with the first challenge, that of defining what ethical should mean within the round. From Aristotle’s theory that one must simply “try” acting ethically, and they will invariably do so, to the theory that intentions have no impact on ethics whatsoever, the following sections will look at the most prevalent ideas on how ethics can be determined. Here is an outline of the theories covered:

* Virtue Ethics
* Deontology
  + Kantian Ethics
* Consequentialism
  + Utilitarianism
  + Rule-utilitarianism

## Virtue Ethics

Virtue Ethics is among the oldest theories on ethics, first posturized by Aristotle himself. Often, when one thinks of ethics, they think of a rulebook and “lines that cannot be crossed.” Virtue Ethics is the opposite of that. The YouTube channel Crash Course has an excellent, concise description: **Virtue Ethics argues that “If we can just focus on being good people, the right actions will follow effortlessly.”[[3]](#footnote-3)** Aristotle believed this was true because he considered virtue, or acting ethically, to be naturally imbued in individuals. According to him, being good is as simple as attempting to harness that virtue.

## Deontology

Deontology is considered to be the first major theory of ethics that attempted to define such beyond merely “trying to be virtuous.” The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines deontological ethics: “In deontological ethics, an action is considered morally good because of some characteristic of the action itself, not because the product of the action is good.”[[4]](#footnote-4) **Deontology is the belief that the ethicality of an action is based on moral duty and not affected by the outcome or effects of the action itself.**

Immanuel Kant, who is credited with first posturizing deontology, has his own subset of deontological ethics called Kantianism. Kant held a key fundamental belief about moral duty and ethics which he summarizes with the term *categorical imperative*. Categorical imperatives are, in Kant’s eyes, a set of rules that one must always follow or lines one must never cross; they are an interpretation of the “moral duty” referred to in the definition of Deontology.

Kant gave three separate ways to determine categorical imperatives, which he claimed would all reach the same conclusion. The first is: “Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Breaking that down, think of a maxim as a “rule of thumb” such as “Do not lie.” When Kant said “will that it become a universal law,” he was referring to two core ideas he held regarding 1) *not making an exception for yourself* and 2) *avoiding contradictions*. To will that a maxim (or rule) become a universal law is roughly equivalent to saying that if everyone followed this rule, you could/would still follow it yourself to achieve your goal (in other words, there is no contradiction of an action becoming ineffective once everyone utilizes it).

Here is a basic example of a categorical imperative through the thought experiment of asking the following question: “Is lying ethical?” Well, why do we lie? Generally speaking, we lie to deceive or trick other people into believing something that is not true. According to Kant, if you ever lie you are temporarily following the maxim “always lie” (Kant rejected adding context to maxims, such as “always lie when in a job interview”, because this can potentially change the results of the thought experiment). Now let’s apply Kant’s test by considering a world where everyone followed this maxim. In such a world, could you still deceive or trick other people by lying? Of course not, because people, aware that every other person in existence always lies, wouldn’t believe you. Therefore, Kant claimed the following was a categorical imperative: “Never lie.”

Understand that Kantianism leaves no exceptions to categorical imperatives. No matter the cost, even if not lying led to someone dying, a Kantian could never justify lying.

## Consequentialism

Consequentialism is the final theory on ethics this article will explore. While there are many subsets of consequentialism, we’ll focus on just two: utilitarianism and rule-utilitarianism. Compared to deontology, consequentialism is quite simple. Consequentialists believe the ethics of an action are determined solely by their *consequences*, or effects.

Utilitarianism, the original subset of consequentialism, was founded by Jeremy Bentham.[[6]](#footnote-6) It can be summarized as the belief that the most ethical action is the one which “provides the greatest good for the greatest number.” Notice a key flaw of this rule: It allows anyone to ignore all authorities, laws, etc. in favor of what they may believe to be best for society. This shortcoming led John Stuart Mill, a follower of Jeremy Bentham, to create rule-utilitarianism.

Rule-utilitarianism aims to vkeep order and law by re-introducing a theory of Kant’s: maxims. Instead of it being most ethical to take the *action* which leads to the greatest good, a rule-utilitarian says it is most ethical to follow the *maxim*, or rule, that leads to the greatest good. This new theory is generally interpreted to imply that governments and bodies of power are the ones deciding what those rules should be, thus reinstating the authority of law which was undermined by utilitarianism.

# Ethics in Context – Is Preventive Warfare Justified?

The topic of preventive warfare begs a fundamental question: Why? What is the purpose of attacking “preventively?” The second section of this article will begin by examining the philosophy of preventive warfare, then hold this philosophy against the various ethics theories that have been discussed.

## The Philosophy of Preventive Warfare

If we are going to try and explain why governments enact preventive warfare, we’ll have to define it first. Here is a rudimentary definition from Enclyclopedia.com: “Preventive war occurs when a state launches a military conflict to prevent another state or other international actor from becoming a threat.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Rather open ended, this definition could include situations ranging from attacking another nation because they are currently repositioning troops in your direction to attacking a nation because one fears that nation may grow more powerful over a span of several decades, which would make them a threat.

There is, however, a common factor provided by this definition stemming from the word “threat.” Preventive warfare claims to be defensive in nature, not wanting to start conflict but merely deal with such threats and dangers against a nation. After all, governments have an undeniable obligation to protect their citizens and, to an extent, provide for their wellbeing. The problem is, preventive warfare is also fundamentally aggressive, because, by definition, it requires one state attack another *before* any true conflict has occurred.

## Applying Ethics

If preventive warfare can be understood as one state acting aggressively against another to defend their citizens’ wellbeings, determining the ethics of preventive warfare is a matter of asking whether a nation can justify initiating conflict and leaving all possibilities for peace behind to better protect their own citizens. Answering that question requires some sort of framework, be it virtue ethics, deontology, consequentialism, or some other test for ethics. So, how do the frameworks discussed in Section One handle preventive warfare?

First, consider Aristotle’s theory of virtue ethics. Simply put, this is a bad framework for a debate round. Not only is it impossible to prove that a government is trying to act virtuously in going to war, but you will be hard-pressed to prove that people are imbued with an unquestionable sense of virtue that they must merely try to utilize. Furthermore, because virtue ethics claims that a nation trying to act ethically must therefore be acting ethically, using this theory as a framework for a round would remove the point for even having a debate, since the effects and even goals of preventive warfare no longer matter.

Leaving virtue ethics behind, how does deontology and Kantianism handle preventive warfare? Remember, a hardline Kantian ethicist would argue that something can only be unethical if in violation of a categorical imperative. Applying the test discussed earlier, we can imagine a world where all governments operate by the rule of attacking nations who they fear will be threats in the future – our definition of preventive warfare. Could any given nation still use preventive warfare to protect their citizens? If yes, then preventive warfare is ethical according to Immanuel Kant, since there is no categorical imperative to avoid preventive warfare.

A major pitfall of this test of deontology is its complexity. These are deep and often-convoluted concepts, and conveying them consistently in each of your debate rounds, within a thirteen-minute speaking period, all while still addressing your opponents points, would be challenging for even the most experienced and well-prepared debaters. For this reason, a hardline stance of deontology is likely not the optimal framework to argue within the round.

Finally, what does consequentialism say about preventive warfare? Utilitarian consequentialists believe that the greatest action is the one which produces the greatest good for the greatest number, while rule-utilitarian consequentialists argue that people should follow the general rule which creates the best outcome for society instead of each individual taking the action they consider to be best.

From either a utilitarian or rule-utilitarian standpoint, a possible interpretation is that preventive warfare would be ethical if and *only* *if* it prevented a greater conflict and loss of life/abuse of human rights in the future – in other words, led to a greater good. If the preventive attack does not lead to less harm in the end, it must invariably be unethical. Notably, this interpretation of consequentialism leaves no room to consider any possible obligations or duties that a government has to its citizens more-so than the rest of the world. Because of this, most people (and judges) would consider pure utilitarianism to be too elementary to handle the case of preventive warfare by itself.

From considering each of these theories of ethics individually, it is clear that all have limitations within the debate round. How then to best approach the concept of ethics? One possibility is to create a new theory of ethics, drawing from different theories discussed here. For example, it is perfectly valid to claim that both intentions (deontology) and consequences (consequentialism) deserve some role in determining if an action is ethical.

# Conclusion

Hopefully, this article has equipped you in two ways: First, by explaining the key theories surrounding what is ethical today and secondly, by considering these theories in the context of the philosophy of preventive warfare. All of these theories have possible down-sides within a debate, so it will be your task to determine the best framework for you and to use it to establish the ethics of preventive warfare.

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6. Driver, Julia. “The History of Utilitarianism.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 22 Sept. 2014, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/utilitarianism-history/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “Preventive War.” *Americans at War*, Encyclopedia.com, 2019, [www.encyclopedia.com/defense/energy-government-and-defense-magazines/preventive-war](http://www.encyclopedia.com/defense/energy-government-and-defense-magazines/preventive-war). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)