

***On War: A Dialogue*, by Brian Orend**

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In the tradition of Plato's Socratic Dialogues and Edna St. Vincent Millay's *Conversation at Midnight*, Brian Orend's new book, *On War: A Dialogue*, presents a provocative meander through the complex moral and ethical issues of war. He does this in a way that is scholarly, yet avoids the fog and haze of other heavier philosophical works. Additionally, by implicit invitation, he challenges readers to think through these difficult issues and establish their own independent positions. Orend nicely balances the often competing goals of imparting knowledge while allowing readers to think for themselves.

Orend goes about this task by assembling a cast of characters coming together at a military hospital in Germany to support Major Gil Gordon, a U.S. soldier critically wounded while serving in Iraq. As surgeons attempt to save his life, his spouse, Lori Gordon, converses with myriad characters trying to make sense of a war that may result in her husband's death. It is through these conversations that Orend explores the salient moral and ethical issues of war. Initially, some readers may recoil at the contrived setting, stereotypical character portrayals, and minor military institutional inaccuracies, but patience will pay dividends. Philosophical discussions of this nature can be haughty and often complex. We forget that these philosophical concepts, when actualized, have consequences, and by focusing on Gil, Orend reminds us that issues of this nature are not just academic.

Orend provides a fairly comprehensive exposé of the important theories regarding the definition of war and the causes of war. While not overwhelming the reader, he provides these definitions and how they evolved within this field of study. More importantly, he provides snapshots of causes of war to include economic, anthropological, ideological, psychological, and feminist theory, along with

all the major works that support each of these viewpoints. Orend also incorporates a very straightforward discussion of “realism” interweaving excerpts and concepts from the Old Testament, and the writings of Augustine, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Michael Walzer.

Orend then explores in detail the concepts of *jus ad bellum* (justice of war) and *jus in bello* (justice in war). He starts with a thorough discussion of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 and progresses to the Charter of the United Nations, in particular Article 51. Orend goes beyond this with a classical discussion of *jus post bellum* (justice after war). This is particularly valuable given our current operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan and the nature of modern warfare. He centers this discussion on the policies of revenge and policies of rehabilitation and how both can affect ultimate success or failure. Finally, Orend provides one of the best and most easily understandable explanations of the differences between international law and just war theory and why those differences are important. Essential here is Orend’s reference to the works of James Dobbins and his theories on postwar windows of opportunity. These theories shed some insight on why postwar reconstruction is so complicated and how long it might take to stabilize the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Future leaders would do well to pay special attention to these insights and commit to deep study on the potential second and third order effects of going to war. Orend also provides a ten-step process for entering into, conducting, and ending a war.

As a whole, the book offers a broad overview of the major philosophical issues involving war. Orend touches on all the major contributors to this field of study. This book is not designed for the scholar, but it works for precisely that reason. The misspelling of Samuel Huntington’s last name throughout the book would be enough to cause some academics to hyperventilate. That, however, would not affect the rest of us. One can also opine that the hospital setting is a bit contrived. It would be difficult to find a military spouse willing to engage in a complex philosophical discussion at the very moment medical staff attempt to save her loved one’s life. The literary device of character dialogue though helps us to think through issues in a way that is natural and compelling. Additionally, the positions or viewpoints of some of the characters are very predictable and perhaps somewhat cliché. In particular, Nick Gordon, a U.S. Army general and Gil’s uncle, is portrayed with a hawkish military bias that is tired and overused. However, Orend balances the conversation and ultimately covers all the positions despite attributing

them to predictable characters. In the end, this book is a wonderful starting point for anyone wanting to examine the major moral and ethical questions of war.

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