


Book Review: War and the Politics of ethics by Maja Zehfuss

Author: [Shambhawi Tripathi](#) , PhD candidate at the Department of International Relations, University of St Andrews

Keywords: [politics](#), [ethics](#), [just war](#), [war](#), [bodies](#), [Maja Zehfuss](#)

Published on **3 February 2022** | Peer Reviewed | CC BY 3.0
The Author(s) retain Copyright of this article.

The human capacity to imagine enables us to spell worlds into existence, which would otherwise remain fettered by epistemic loyalties paid forward as ontological debts, obstructing alternate conceptualisations of realities. The irony, however, of Barack Obama becoming the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize for his extraordinary efforts in ‘reimagining’ a new international climate, all while wielding nuclear launch codes on his person, is not lost on Maja Zehfuss, not least because it challenges the ethics of imagination in a power-ridden world. Is imagination, then, the problem or the solution? *War and the politics of ethics* is a fitting culmination of Zehfuss’s tireless work towards unpacking the ethical/just war imaginary and the very political consequences it has for how we understand the phenomenon of war and the discipline of International Relations (Zehfuss, 2012a, 2012b, 2018). This review will attempt to engage with some of the critical arguments of the book by placing them alongside the author’s assiduous dismantling of the theory and practice of “ethical war”. Reiterating Zehfuss’s attempt to demystify the practice of ethical war by focusing not on its failures but rather on its purported “achievements”, this review invites reflection on whether these are indeed cause for celebration.

The most original contribution this book makes is the scathing critique launched on the just war tradition itself, by way of explicating the untenable politics/ethics divide it reifies. Zehfuss’ treatise makes a critical contribution by gleaning the emotional and human costs of theorising that have led to the indoctrination of knowledge systems like just war and, more recently, ethical war. Zehfuss is suspicious of the seamless attachment of and continued reliance on ethics to the practice of war and the uncritical acceptance of the costs that come with the justification of war as an ethical mode of emancipation by those who wage it. She reminds us that once a war is deemed moral, it has no end. Zehfuss attributes the emptying out of politics from ethics to the occupation of moral discourse in war by the just war tradition (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 24). There is a problem with the timelessness of the just war tradition

because it is abstracted from and not informed by the lived experience of war (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 29). Perhaps the richest contribution this book makes, by tracing the origins and status of the tradition, is exposing its role in justifying war rather than limiting it (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 33). It reiterates the seductive and productive potential of ethical imaginaries in the study of global politics because of the very real and tangible effects such fantasies have on the political practice of ethical war. Ethics produce epistemic objects which form powerful imaginaries that have lethal consequences. The projection of the 'self-belief of being able to limit destruction' (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 181) whilst normalising the use of violence is but one example of how imaginaries – when delinked from bodies and politics – uphold a distorted view of an 'ethical purpose' (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 181) for wars waged by the Western world. Zehfuss takes up the issue of naturalisation of the problem of 'disembodied calculation' about bodies, emotions and ethics in war by interrogating the reduction of ethics to questions about who to kill instead of the act of killing itself (Zehfuss, 2018). The leap from non-human (technological) war to inhuman war is made palpable by the fantastical imaginary of ethics as a control on killing in war. The 'fantasy of control' (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 182) over the violence caused through war, waged on behalf of those (Non-West) who cannot save themselves, serves as the fabric upon which ethical war is drawn and preserved (Zehfuss, 2018).

Blowing out the smokescreen of ethics within which the violent practice of wars is cloaked, Zehfuss posits that the purported seclusion and purity of ethics is exactly what renders ethics deeply political. The danger of cordoning off ethics from politics has never been more acute than in the practice of war, because 'ethics spurs war' (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 9). The invocation of ethics transforms war from being the last resort politically to the only resort ethically. The site of mapping the politics of ethics, therefore, is the actual practice of what has come to be known as ethical war – its nomenclature, methods and goals – which are precipitated by the question of morality (Zehfuss, 2018). Challenging the imaginary pursuit of 'correcting' and 'bettering' the efforts to adhere to ethics instead of suspecting the apolitical articulation of such ethics itself, Zehfuss contends that 'it is not the implementation, but rather the understanding of ethics itself, that is mistaken' (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 187). By making explicit pre-existing political contexts and costs of the illusory claims to ethics which pervade as the pursuit of cultural knowledge, achieving target efficiency through drones and by positing Western militaries as 'forces of good', Zehfuss brings the focus back from 'not when things go wrong, but when they go right' (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 12), to argue that they can never be right as long as war is defended as an ethical pursuit. Zehfuss brilliantly highlights how ethics 'become self-reinforcing' (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 12), a cause for celebration of precision in warfare, and a technology to harness culture for justifying violence against the same people it sought to save (Zehfuss, 2018).

Another important site of reflection this book offers is the harmful disembodied treatment of killing – made more acute through the practice(s) of ethical war. The book is charted as a journey from dilemmas to paradoxes, which eventually become puzzles that demand

critical attention. Zehfuss identifies the precise moment in which the dilemma of killing metamorphoses into a paradox; when war becomes risky for those on whose behalf it is being waged (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 16). This shift does not bring ethics into the realm of politics but, rather, makes it palpable by blowing up the hypocrisy around the increased danger to people by militaries that claim to be forces of good (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 19). She concerns herself with the ‘production of the obvious’ to point out how the seemingly common sensical primacy of saving non-combatants, which serves as a crucial starting point for ethical war, is inherently culpable in creating the conditions for these deaths in the first place (Zehfuss, 2012a, 2012b). She asks how it is right to kill those we intend to kill but, even more importantly, ‘what does it mean to “mean to”’ (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 89) – a question that reveals the politico-ethics of decision-making in war and the violence against those claimed to be protected by these very decisions. The question of the *ethics of killing* forms an indelible part of the just war rubric because it creates the precarious separation of those who are intended to be targeted (and killed), and those who are not targeted (but are also killed) and become collateral damage (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 88). Just war, from being a legal dilemma to a moral paradox, becomes puzzling when tragedy works to relegate certain deaths beyond intention (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 37). The classification of foreseeable deaths as tragic places them outside the ambit of responsibility by the benefit of being unintentional (Zehfuss, 2018). Following from Judith Butler’s (2004, 2009) succinct analysis about ‘grievable bodies’, this book attempts to highlight the incommensurability of the stated ‘tragedy’ of civilian deaths within the framework of ‘ethical war which continues to be promoted and enacted’ (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 21). The ethical implication of terming non-combatant casualties as accidental is made visible because such naming permits civilian deaths instead of forbidding them (Owens, 2003). If certain deaths are not intended but foreseeable, can they be categorised as accidental (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 27)? Zehfuss contends that ethics bleed through politics rather than tempering it. Fagan’s thesis about the ‘interpenetration of ethics and politics’ (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 53) serves as Zehfuss’s map to underline the reality that any situation that calls for ethics is already deeply political.

Ethics are political because they act, not as limits to but as enablers of the kind of deaths that were previously impossible. This is a useful entry point into Zehfuss’s most poignant argument; in order to understand the politics of ethics in war, the focus needs to be on the practice of ethical war as it is intended, not as the mistakes that arise when it does not go as intended. For Zehfuss, the ethical claim to precision is defied by evidence that reflects how increased precision has not resulted in increased protection of non-combatants (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 68), not least because while ethics provided a convenient frame for precision killing (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 70), they are in the service of Western combatants at the cost of non-Western non-combatants, who rely on inexact intelligence about potential targets. She admittedly does not examine if precision bombing has made war less ethical¹ (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 57) but, instead, unpacks the articulation and implementation of such ‘precision’ to unveil how the use of the term itself establishes an acceptable degree of imprecision (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 63). The role played by drones in widening the perceived schism between ‘our wars’ and ‘their

wars' does not uphold but undermines the ethical claims of the former (Zehfuss, 2018). The killing of non-combatants by remote bombs has resulted in increased alienation and desire for revenge, as reflected by increasing recruit figures even in the face of increased drone strikes (Kilcullen and McDonald Exum, 2009). The persistent "hovering" of drones serves as a metaphor for a war that is never too far and, by extension, never ending. What is termed ethical war, therefore, is more critically identified as 'risk-transfer war' (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 86), where the means and degree of violence becomes wholly one-sided, erasing any differences between combatants and civilians, by erasing the difference between conflict and peace.

The Western habit of cancelling bodies till they pile up or its effort to articulate their suffering to overwhelm such habits of exclusion leave much wanting from the ethical standards or the lack thereof in the discipline of International Politics. Zehfuss iterates the high expectations from already suffering bodies² by highlighting how they are made to 'suddenly matter' (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 95) only to become assimilated in the service of war strategy. The turn towards cultural knowledge as a way to assuage moral crises that arise in the course of violating target and civilian populations has also become a means to operationalise a morally sanctioned and, therefore, unending war. Zehfuss takes the time to dive deep into the strategies of cultural information gathering, which coalesced most visibly in the US military's *Counterinsurgency field manual* (2007) that came out of a misplaced ethics where more accurate knowledge could lead to fewer unintended casualties, not least because such knowledge lacked scholarly 'complexity and ambiguity' (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 101) and remained 'foreign and ungraspable' (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 103). The detailed investigation of the definitions, paradoxes and limits of the Manual lays bare the stunted imagination for ethics, and its place in the study of global politics and the people who inhabit it. The activation of the term 'human terrain' itself works to 'reduce people to an aspect of the environment to be controlled and manipulated' (p. 130) and, therefore, dehumanises them, lifting the illusion that cultural sensitivity can make wars gentle. The relegation of other cultures as foreign and incomprehensible makes up a deeply racial and hierarchical 'political system which is a much more profound victory than one that is merely military' (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 132) and is what makes ethics fraught with politics. Cultural engagement claimed to make war 'gentler' but achieved this by 'making the violence of war disappear altogether' (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 92) through an exclusive iteration of ethics as reduced killing and not as the exercise of political control through such strategies (Zehfuss, 2018).

Zehfuss dedicates substantial space to the exploration of modes of war that make war ethically appealing and marketable: precision bombing, cultural engagement and ethics education for militaries. Her attempt to bring reality as 'intended' in conversation with reality as 'experienced' is nothing short of brilliant because it lays bare the new violence made possible only through its association to and sanctification by the paradigm of ethical war. The sedimentation of a discourse where ethics is the backdrop to war ensures that incidents of atrocious excesses of military violence are deemed as individual digressions from the

otherwise ethically disciplined manuals of military organisations (Zehfuss, 2018). Zehfuss powerfully contends that the diminution of ethically challenging situations to individual choices that can be handled and improved upon by better soldiers is precisely what allows ethics to be considered without politics. The violence that results from the very practice of ethical war is explained away as mistakes, accidents or tragedies resulting from momentary or personal ethical failures, and does nothing to dismantle the (il)logic of ethical war itself. The “‘bad apple’ argument’ works untiringly to protect the illusory pursuit of war and violence as ethical, as critics of war accept narratives that frame excess violence and damage as a result of things ‘gone horribly wrong’ (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 158) instead of being political products of a problematic ethics that sanctions the violence it condemns. Giving space for stories of moral crises felt by combatants following orders and upholding value systems, resulting from the emotional debris of perpetrating violence no matter how ethically agreeable it is made out to be, Zehfuss points out the impossibility of being a good soldier, even (and especially) within ethical wars, because such soldiers ‘have to act at the limit of ethics’ (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 177). Zehfuss analyses the experiences of experts involved in Human Terrain Teams (HTT), who faced dilemmas about the purpose that their cultural immersion and ‘potentially dangerous’ (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 125), ‘mission-relevant’ (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 127) knowledge generation was fulfilling. The book investigates the status of academic knowledge in the war-fighting effort to explain how the ‘technology of social science methodology’ is a powerful tool of control for militaries, which strips away instead of bringing back ‘the human dimension’ (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 129).

This book will disappoint those looking for solutions within the paradigm of ethical war, because it asks a more fundamental question: can/should war ever be legitimately (re)framed as ethical? The Western project to ‘make a positive difference through war without too much of a cost’ (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 6) does less to constrain war and the violence associated with it, and reformulates ethics as a front to carry out newer, more intrusive forms of violence (Zehfuss, 2018). The issue of ethics and its role in making war more ‘targeted’ is a layered problem, not least because it is posed as a solution, an improvement upon previous forms of war. This book launches a scathing critique upon the ‘enthusiasm for ethics’ (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 9) because it legitimises the use of force while claiming to constrain it. Zehfuss posits the indefensibility of an ethics that are produced through wars and seek to legitimise it by identifying people as targets or combatants and creating permissible conditions for killing them (Zehfuss, 2018). Getting rid of politics to make war ethical is the problem and not the solution, because ‘politics has always been there already’ (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 207). Zehfuss rightfully shows the inherent failure of a ‘commitment to ethics’ (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 206) in the context of war because it fails to deliver protection to both non-combatants (by bringing violence closer to them) and combatants (by exacerbating the moral crises they face as guilt). ‘Can others’ humanity be protected by using force that might also kill them?’ (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 195): the answer needs to be formulated outside ethics and necessarily in political and emotional terms.

Knowledge about ethics collapses and fails to provide instructions at the precise moment when we are faced with a situation that demands an ethical decision (Zehfuss, 2018). Such a confrontation necessitates political *and* ethical choices, which undermines the ethics *or* politics conceptualisation that sustains much of conventional wisdom on issues that plague thinkers of global politics. Zehfuss argues that ‘ethics should be seen as an experience of the impossible’ (Gregory, 2019, p. 315). The (re)focus on “limits” to knowledge opens up the black box of decision-making, because the gorge between *past* knowledge and *future* decision forms the flesh of the *present* dilemma. This book has tasked itself with embracing rather than escaping situations that make ethico-political demands which bring us to the edge of our knowledge. Zehfuss successfully contends that the Derridean abyss where no decision can be purely ethical or political, responsible *or* irresponsible, is ‘necessary to experience responsibility’ (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 47) and that is her ultimate call to action: to ask how we can conceive of and ascribe responsibility beyond body counts, by fostering constitutive and relational ways of understanding politics and ethics and their inscription upon human bodies endangered at war. When ethical war fails the stunted standards it sets for its own practice, the schism cannot be stitched together with *more ethics*, it needs to be restored with *less war*. Maja Zehfuss brings us to the heart of the liminality between ethics and politics that has marked the study of and, indeed, the disciplinary directions that International Relations has taken and those it has forsaken, to question the ethics–politics binary by illustrating that ‘what matters always happens at the limit’ (Zehfuss, 2018, p. 197). The debt to Zehfuss for her defiance to the highest ethical defences of war, and the recentring of warred bodies as an ethico-political (re)direction for global politics, is provocative and enduring.

- ¹ This would be an important direction for future research, not least because it would help rearticulate the meaning and space for ethics in the study of war.
 - ² The ethics of demanding made of suffering bodies is investigated by Emma Hutchison (2019). She asks a seminal question: ‘Why do those who suffer have to do more than those who do not?’ (p. 296).
-

Bibliography

Butler, J. (2004) *Precarious life. The powers of mourning and violence*. London: Verso.

Butler, J. (2009) *Frames of war: when is life grievable?* London: Verso.

Gregory, T. (2019) ‘Ethics and war: a critical introduction’, *Millennium Journal of International Studies*, 47 (2), pp. 309-320.

Hutchison, E. (2019) ‘Emotions, bodies and the un/making of International Relations’, *Millennium Journal of International Studies*, 47 (2), pp. 284-298.

Kilcullen, D. and McDonald Exum, A. (2009) 'Death from above, outrage down below', *The New York Times*, 16 May [Online]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/17/opinion/17exum.html> (Accessed: 27 August 2021).

Owens, P. (2005) 'Accidents don't just happen: the liberal politics of high-technology "humanitarian" war', *Millennium Journal of International Studies*, 32 (3), pp. 595-616.

Zehfuss, M. (2012a) 'Contemporary Western war and the idea of humanity', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 30 (5), pp. 861-876.

Zehfuss, M. (2012b) 'Killing civilians: thinking the practice of war', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 14 (3), pp. 423-440.

Zehfuss, M. (2018) *War and the politics of ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.