

A Fundamental Asymmetry in Judgments of Soldiers at War

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How should we judge a soldier who is fighting for an unjust cause? Is such a soldier the moral equal of a soldier fighting for an opposing, just cause? According to traditional just war theory (Walzer, 2006), soldiers on either side of a war are moral equals, regardless of the justness of the cause for which they fight (the “principle of combatant equality”). According to revisionist just war theory, however, the justness of the soldiers’ causes should inform moral judgments of their actions; on this view, our judgments of soldiers on either side of a just versus unjust war should therefore be asymmetric (McMahan, 2009). Despite intense philosophical debate regarding these 2 theories, little work has examined whether lay moral judgments accord with the principle of combatant equality. Assessing lay moral judgments is important because people’s attitude toward soldiers may have a variety of consequences, ranging from their support for war, to their acceptance, rejection, or valorization of individual combatants. Across 9 studies, we find consistent evidence that ordinary individuals’ judgments of soldiers’ actions are influenced by the justness of the soldiers’ causes, contrary to the principle of combatant equality. Two factors partially explain this effect: First, people implicitly presume that soldiers identify with the cause for which they fight, which influences moral judgments of their actions; second, people implicitly align themselves with the just side of a war, treating combatants on the just side as part of their ingroup, thus rendering more favorable moral judgments of them. Several other possible explanations were not supported.

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In 2009, Barack Obama, President of the United States and the Commander-in-Chief of the world’s most powerful military force, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Many commentators felt that this award was premature, and controversy was further heightened when Obama devoted his Nobel Lecture (acceptance speech) to the subject of war (Fouché & Sturcke, 2009; Franke-Ruta, 2009, 2013; Zeleny, 2009). Invoking the notion of “just war,” he argued that at times it may not be merely necessary, but also morally justified, for a country to go to war (Obama, 2009). He then drew an important distinction: “Even as we make difficult decisions about going to war, we must also think clearly about how we fight it . . .

we have a moral and strategic interest in binding ourselves to certain rules of conduct.” These remarks drew upon the philosophical and ethical doctrine known as *just war theory* (Walzer, 2006), the goal of which is to establish criteria for judging the morality of war (Walzer, 2006). The roots of just war theory stretch back to St Augustine and Aquinas, but its contemporary version is usually attributed to Michael Walzer, who reinvigorated it in the context of the Vietnam War with his book *Just and Unjust Wars* (Orend, 2013; Walzer, 2006). In addition to providing the philosophical grounding for many international laws of armed conflict (Orend, 2013), just war theory is the most prominent doctrine referenced when discussing the morality of war (Fiala, 2008; Orend, 2013). For example, the question of whether the wars led by the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq following the 9/11 terrorist attacks were just or unjust was debated in terms of just war theory (Bugnion, 2002; Carter, 2003; Coady, 2011; Douzinas, 2009; Mackey, 2009).

A cornerstone of just war theory is the distinction Obama invoked between the justification for a country’s going to war in the first place (known as *jus ad bellum*), and the rules of conduct that guide how the war is actually carried out (known as *jus in bello*). The idea that these aspects of war should be evaluated separately is referred to as the *independence thesis* (Walzer, 2006). The independence thesis, in turn, implies the related principle of *combatant equality*, which is the focus of this article. According to this principle, soldiers fight permissibly as long as they abide by the prescribed rules of conduct in war, regardless of the cause for

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which they fight (Lazar, 2017).¹ Consequently, as long as soldiers on either side of a war follow the prescribed rules of conduct their actions are morally equivalent and should be judged symmetrically.² This means that, regardless of whether you believe the United States was justified in going to war in the 1991 Gulf War, for instance, you should judge U.S. soldiers fighting in that war only according to whether they abide by the rules of conduct prescribed by just war theory. Similarly, you should also judge Iraqi soldiers fighting in the same war, against the United States, only according to whether they abide by these same rules. The principle of combatant equality is prescriptive; it is an attempt to delineate how people should think about war. However, in the present article, we address a descriptive question: To what extent (and under which conditions) do lay people's moral judgments about the conduct of war align with the principle of combatant equality? Despite the centrality of this principle in philosophy and international law, to date no empirical research has comprehensively assessed its correspondence with ordinary people's moral judgments about war.

One key motivation for the principle of combatant equality is that soldiers on either side of a war operate under a "shared servitude" (Walzer, 2006). In essence, soldiers on either side of a war are heavily and equally constrained—they serve as instruments of the state, they do not choose the wars they fight, or the missions they engage in, and they must obey their superiors' orders in battle. This view strips soldiers of responsibility concerning the cause for which they fight and holds them responsible only for their conduct in fighting. As such, it implies that moral judgments of soldiers on either side of a war should be symmetrical; hence giving rise to the principle of combatant equality. Two soldiers, engaging in identical actions, but who are on opposite sides of a war, ought to be judged equivalently in moral terms, regardless of the justness of their respective causes (Walzer, 2006).

However, this argument has not gone unchallenged. Advocates of what is referred to as *revisionist* just war theory (to contrast with Walzer's *traditional* just war theory; Benbaji, Falk, & Feldman, 2015; Leveringhaus, 2012; McMahan, 2009) claim that neither the independence thesis nor the principle of combatant equality is justified. According to these theorists, traditional arguments for the principle of combatant equality unrealistically limit the moral capacities of soldiers. For instance, one of the principal advocates of revisionist just war theory, Jeff McMahan (2004), argues that, "Walzer exaggerates the significance of the coercive pressures and the constraints on knowledge that often apply to those whose government orders them to fight" (p. 700, see also Nozick, 1974). Not only are soldiers in fact quite capable of judging the morality of the causes for which they fight, they are often not so severely constrained that they cannot make a moral choice to abstain from fighting should they deem their own side's cause unjust. McMahan also argues that, even if it were the case that a soldier's decision to fight for an unjust cause was caused by a lack of relevant knowledge, or by overwhelming coercive pressures, this would at best show that the soldier's wrongful behavior was excused (McMahan, 2004, 2009). It would not show that their behavior was morally permissible, nor would it show that their behavior was on par, morally speaking, with the behavior of a combatant on the just side of the war. Therefore, McMahan (2004) rejects the principle of combatant equality (for further arguments against the traditionalist position, see McMahan, 2009).

The question we ask in this article is whether—with respect to the principle of combatant equality—ordinary individuals' moral judgments about the actions taken by soldiers in war align more closely with traditional just war theory, or with its revisionist counterpart. That is, do ordinary people judge soldiers' conduct in war independently of the side for which they fight, in line with the principle of combatant equality, or are their judgments instead influenced by information about the justness of the soldiers' respective sides? This question has not yet been directly addressed in the moral psychological literature. Answering it would yield several benefits.

First, it would shed light on the descriptive adequacy of two major philosophical theories of war and its conduct. Although these two theories were not intended as descriptive accounts of people's judgments, they are intended partly to guide public sentiments about war (McMahan, 2010; Walzer & Margalit, 2009). Indeed, McMahan (2009) believes that widespread acceptance of the principle of combatant equality is a propellant toward war, writing that,

the widespread acceptance of this idea [that a soldier does not do wrong merely by fighting in an unjust war, owing to the principle of combatant equality] also makes it easier for independently-minded people . . . to fight in war without qualms about whether the war might be unjust. (p. 3)

Whether McMahan is correct about this is unknown. It is also unknown whether he is correct to assume such widespread acceptance of the principle of combatant equality in the first place. As a starting point, it seems worth finding out.

Second, addressing this question opens further subsidiary questions of theoretical interest, regarding the factors guiding people's judgments of soldiers: What is the explanation for why people make symmetric or asymmetric judgments about soldiers' conduct in war? Just war theorists evoke various factors to justify their normative stances. Our aim, however, was to investigate, descriptively, which psychological factors actually guide people's moral judgments, regardless of their relation to any particular philosophical stance. Factors such as the correspondence bias or ingroup bias may be relevant, particularly given their demonstrated importance in other contexts (see, e.g., Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002; Malle, 2006). However, determining whether they can explain moral judgments in war is not a straight-

¹ In this article, we use the terms *combatant* and *soldier* interchangeably, notwithstanding the fact that *combatant* is a more general term that covers soldiers as well as sailors, airmen, or irregular fighters (Rodin & Shue, 2008, p. 2). In all our studies, the moral agent is a soldier fighting in a regular army, but we expect that the results would generalize to combatants from the air force and navy as well. We mostly write about soldiers in the plural and use the pronouns *they* and *them*. But, when describing an individual soldier (e.g., to participants in our studies) we refer to *he* and *him*, because most soldiers are male (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, 2013).

² The philosophical principles of *ius in bello* are generally considered to be discrimination (between combatant and non-combatant), proportionality, necessity (Lazar, 2017), responsibility (Moseley, n.d.), and a restriction on means that are *mala in se*—bad in and of themselves (Moseley, n.d.; Orend, 2005). Meanwhile, in international law, these principles have been given a more concrete articulation in the form of customary international humanitarian law (Henckaerts & Doswald-Beck, 2005). To avoid unnecessary jargon, we refer to *ius in bello* as "rules of conduct."

forward task. Our studies make progress in answering this mechanistic question.

Third, our research complements research on “everyday” human morality (e.g., Hofmann, Wisneski, Brandt, & Skitka, 2014) by studying some of the more extreme situations humans find themselves in (Hedges, 2002; James, 1910/1968; Shue, 2008; Watkins & Brandt, 2019). War has been a stark reality for a vast number of people for all of human history (Pinker, 2011; Wimmer, 2014), and it is saturated with moral considerations (Lazar, 2017). Yet, we know very little about people’s moral judgments about the conduct of war. Studying moral judgments in this context—with its immediate relevance to human affairs—also extends moral judgment research beyond the artificial vignettes that have been a feature of much recent investigation (e.g., trolley problems; Bloom, 2011; Bauman, McGraw, Bartels, & Warren, 2014). Finally, this research may have important implications for understanding how ordinary civilians react to soldiers, before, during, and after war-time. Research in military and clinical psychology has begun to focus on the moral dimensions of soldiers’ experiences, including judgments made of them by friends, family, and other civilians (Brock & Lettini, 2012; Frame, 2015; Sherman, 2015). Our research may contribute to this effort by shedding further light on the social worlds that soldiers inhabit.

To preview our results, across nine studies (including three supplemental studies), we find consistent evidence that ordinary individuals do not judge soldiers on either side of a war as moral equals. Instead, their judgments of soldiers’ conduct are heavily influenced by the justness of the side those soldiers are fighting for—soldiers fighting on the just side of a war are seen as engaging in more defensible conduct than soldiers taking identical actions on the unjust side. As such, our participants’ judgments do not abide by the principle of combatant equality. However, as straightforward as this pattern of results is, it does not yield to an immediate explanation. Across the ensuing studies, we investigate several varied explanations of this asymmetry, which we review in due course.

Relation to Relevant Past Research

Our research provides the first complete test of the descriptive adequacy of the principle of combatant equality. To date, there has been very little psychological research investigating this principle, and what research does exist is incomplete. One relevant finding comes from a pioneering study with Israeli participants, which investigated moral judgments about the conduct of war (Benbaji et al., 2015). Participants were told about a war with a just and an unjust side and were asked to imagine themselves as a military commander serving in the army of either the just or the unjust country. They then judged the moral permissibility of ordering an attack on a strategically significant hill (inhabited by the enemy), to gain a military advantage for their own side. Around half the participants (55.7%) on the just side thought that such an attack would be morally permissible, whereas only 40.8% of the participants on the unjust side thought that it would be permissible, thus seemingly showing that participants’ judgments were not symmetric and were instead influenced by the justness of the soldiers’ respective causes.³ In light of these results, Benbaji et al. (2015) argue that their participants are more like “intuitive revisionists” than “intuitive traditionalists.”

Benbaji et al.’s (2015) study highlights an important exception to the principle of combatant equality. However, two factors limit its ability to yield fully generalizable conclusions about the adequacy of the principle of combatant equality. First, judgments were rendered about a military commander’s strategic decision to order an attack, not about the actions of the soldiers carrying out that attack. It is important to test perceptions of common soldiers for several reasons. Soldiers are more numerous and more representative of the armed services than are military commanders. They are also more constrained than are commanders, and therefore more emblematic of Walzer’s notion of “shared servitude.” Accordingly, if the principle of combatant equality should apply to anyone, it should apply to common soldiers. Yet, without further investigation, it is impossible to know whether the asymmetry in participants’ judgments of military commanders’ decisions, observed in Benbaji et al.’s study, would also be seen in their judgments of soldiers acting in accordance with those decisions. Second, Benbaji et al.’s results are complicated by the fact that participants were asked to align themselves with one side or the other—that is, they were asked to put themselves in the role of one or other of the military commanders, rather than in the role of a third party. This feature of their design may have influenced participants’ judgments. A more neutral assessment of the principle of combatant equality in lay judgments would position participants as third-party judges of a war without aligning them with either side. Accordingly, in the present studies, participants were placed in the role of third-party observers of war (except when we tested the specific effects of alignment, see Study 6 and Supplemental Study 3) and were asked to evaluate the actions of soldiers and not military commanders—specifically, the moral defensibility of those soldiers’ actions.

Overview of Studies

In all studies, our primary outcome measure is participants’ judgments of the moral defensibility of identical actions taken by soldiers on either side of a war.⁴ We manipulated the justness of the cause the soldiers were fighting for to assess whether participants’ judgments of their conduct were symmetric (in line with the

³ The difference between judgments on the just and unjust sides was attenuated by the fact that many participants failed a manipulation check and reported that “their side” was the “just side” even when they had been assigned to the unjust side. When only participants who passed the manipulation check were included, the statistics were 60.0% just side and 38.4% unjust side. See Study 6 for more on this issue.

⁴ We chose to investigate whether soldiers’ actions were “defensible” as our principal dependent variable, rather than possible alternatives, for several reasons. One possible alternative would be to ask whether the soldiers’ actions were “excused.” But, claiming that person’s action is defensible is a stronger claim than that those actions are merely excused. A claim of defensibility means not only that the person is free of blame for the act, but also that the act was warranted; the latter is not true for merely excused actions (see Greenawalt, 1984, 1986). For this reason, we preferred to use *defensible* over *excused*. We also preferred the term *defensible* to its close synonym *justified*, because claiming that an act is defensible seemed to us less suggestive that one must be able to produce the relevant defense (i.e., if you claim that an act is justified, it may seem more incumbent upon you to be able to produce the relevant justification). And we also thought that *defensible* was more natural than *permissible*, which seems less commonly used in daily life.

principle of combatant equality) or asymmetric (contravening this principle).

We paid particular attention to sampling the possible stimulus space broadly, in order to provide the most generalizable evidence. We used four types of war scenario: one country invading another to plunder resources (Studies 1 and 4); one country intervening militarily in another to prevent a humanitarian atrocity (Studies 2 and 3); one country intervening to prevent a hostile take-over of a smaller country by a larger, aggressor country (Study 5); and, finally, two countries warring following a longstanding border dispute (Study 6). Although just war theorists and international legal scholars debate the precise conditions under which resorting to war can be considered just (or legal) versus unjust (or illegal), the key consideration for our purpose was that participants perceived one side of the conflict to be just, and the other unjust (see Table 1). Although we chiefly focused on the straightforward act of killing an enemy combatant, in Study 3 we explored a wide array of different actions, which varied significantly in their underlying moral properties. We also explored different types of judgment by comparing concrete with abstract judgments (Study 2) and joint with separate evaluations (Studies 1 and 2).

Finally, as noted above, we explored several possible reasons for the consistent asymmetry we observed in our participants' judgments, by manipulating factors that might explain it. These factors include situational constraint (Study 3 and Supplemental Study 1), causal contributions to war outcomes (Study 4), identification with the war effort (Study 4 and Supplemental Study 2), global character evaluations (measured in Studies 1–4 and manipulated in Study 5), and alignment with one side or the other to measure ingroup biases (Study 6 and Supplemental Study 3). As will be seen, no one factor appears to explain this asymmetry, although it can be attenuated by two of the factors we considered.

Sample sizes

Participants were recruited for all studies using Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT), and we used the AMT settings to limit participation to U.S. residents. In all studies, we decided on the number of participants based on a “rule of thumb” of no less than 75 participants per cell (except where noted otherwise), as we did not initially have a basis on which to perform a power analysis. In later studies, we recruited larger samples, primarily because the study designs became more complicated. This also meant that we

filtered out more people who failed attention checks, and we report these exclusions for each respective study. We also include more information about these excluded participants in the [online supplemental material](#). In all studies, we decided on the sample size before collecting data and did not analyze the results until after data collection was completed. In all studies, we report all exclusions. Full data files for all studies are available at osf.io/xwgr3, and we also provide all materials at osf.io/zwcmv. The Research Ethics Committee at the University of Pennsylvania determined that the studies met the eligibility criteria for exempt status.

Study 1

Study 1 first investigated whether people judge the actions of soldiers on the just and the unjust sides of a war as morally equivalent, in line with the principle of combatant equality. Participants were presented with information about a hypothetical war in which one country invaded another country to take control of its natural resources. They then indicated the degree to which it is morally defensible for a soldier on one side of the war to kill a soldier on the other side (among other measures). Depending on condition, participants judged either a soldier on the just (defending) or unjust (invading) side. We also included a third, joint evaluation condition, in which participants explicitly compared the moral defensibility of killing carried out by soldiers on the just and unjust sides. This joint evaluation condition allowed us to test whether participants explicitly endorse a difference in the judgment of just and unjust soldiers' conduct (see, e.g., Bartels, 2008; Bazerman & Messick, 1998; Paharia, Kassam, Greene, & Bazerman, 2009).

Method

Participants. Two-hundred-and-twenty-three participants (139 male, 84 female, $M_{\text{age}} = 31.17$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 8.93$) were recruited through AMT and compensated for their participation. Four participants indicated that they had not completed the task properly (see details below) and were excluded from analysis, leaving a total sample size of 219.

Design, materials, and procedure. Participants were allocated to either the joint evaluation condition, or one of the two separate evaluation conditions: defending or invading. In all conditions, participants were first given the following information:

Table 1
Judgments of the Moral Defensibility of Each Country's Decision to Go to War (Manipulation Checks), Studies 1–5

Study	Type of war	M (SD)		Test statistic	p	d
		Just	Unjust			
1	War of aggression	5.37 (1.58)	2.24 (1.54)	$t(145) = 12.16$	<.001	2.01
2	Military humanitarian intervention	5.79 (1.51)	2.97 (1.86)	$t(134) = 9.76$	<.001	1.66
3	Military Humanitarian Intervention + Aggression	6.07 (1.21)	2.61 (1.70)	$F(1, 367) = 718.60$	<.001	2.34
4	War of aggression	6.33 (1.11)	1.86 (1.32)	$F(1, 291) = 1,331.54$	<.001	3.67
5	Intervention against war of aggression	6.16 (1.33)	1.96 (1.38)	$F(1, 500) = 1,859.39$	<.001	3.10

Note. When the war scenario discussed a war of aggression and defense (Studies 1, 4, and 5), the countries involved were referred to as the “defending” and “invading” countries. When the war scenario involved a military humanitarian intervention, the labels were instead “intervening” and “resisting.” Responses were made on a 7-point response scale, from 1 = *not at all morally defensible* to 7 = *completely morally defensible*. For Studies 1 and 2, only the results in the separate conditions are reported here, but the results were the same in the joint condition (see the [online supplemental materials](#)). The design of Study 6 was more complex, and results of the manipulation check for this study are reported in Table 5.

Imagine that there are two countries, currently at war with each other. The reason why the countries are at war is that one country illegitimately invaded and occupied parts of the other country's territory to take control over newly discovered gas deposits.

All potential political and diplomatic solutions have been exhausted to no avail. Thus, the country being invaded eventually resorted to military action as a means of self-defense against this unprovoked aggression. This self-defensive military action has the full support of major international bodies and other countries in the region. The two countries are therefore now at war.

The soldiers fighting in both countries' armies are volunteers; their military recruitment systems work much the same as in the United States. During the war, in one battle, soldiers from each country fight and kill each other.

This background information was based on scenarios developed by Benbaji et al. (2015) and Watkins and Laham (2018b). To heighten the chance that participants would read the scenario properly, a timer ensured that participants spent at least 10 s on this page. The country that invaded the other country was referred to as "the invading country" throughout, and the country that was invaded was referred to as "the defending country."

After reading the introductory material, participants next made two moral judgments about the soldiers' conduct. They were asked (bold type and italics in the original) to "please think about **the soldiers themselves**—who are on the ground, fighting the war, and *killing soldiers from the other country*," and responded to the following questions in a fixed order (manipulation in brackets): "To what extent is it **morally defensible** for a soldier from the [defending/invading] country to kill a soldier from the [invading/defending] country?" (7-point response scale, ranging from 1 = *not at all morally defensible* to 7 = *completely morally defensible*) and "To what extent is it **morally good** or **morally bad** for a soldier from the [defending/invading] country to kill a soldier from the [invading/defending] country?" (7-point bipolar scale ranging from 1 = *very morally bad* to 7 = *very morally good*). In the joint evaluation condition, participants responded to the moral defensibility question for soldiers on both sides, in a counterbalanced order; and to the moral goodness question for soldiers on both sides, in a counterbalanced order. The two moral defensibility questions were always asked before the two moral goodness questions.

Participants then responded to a categorical question that forced a more definitive judgment about moral defensibility. In the separate conditions, this question was "If you *had* to make a judgment one way or the other, do you think the actions of the soldiers from the [defending/invading] country are **morally defensible**?" Response options were "Yes: the [defending/invading] soldiers' actions are morally defensible" and "No: the [defending/invading] soldiers' actions are *not* morally defensible." In the joint evaluation condition, the question was "If you *had* to make a judgment one way or the other, do you think the actions of the soldiers from one country are **more defensible** than the actions of the soldiers from the other country?" Response options were "No: the soldiers' actions are *equally* morally defensible," "Yes: the **invading soldiers'** actions are morally *more* defensible," or "Yes: the **defending soldiers'** actions are morally *more* defensible." In each condition, the response options were presented in a random order for each participant. Afterward, participants were optionally invited to

respond to the question: "Why did you give this answer?" Almost all participants gave a response to this question, but these responses did not elucidate our main research question; they are therefore not analyzed further in this paper.

In Studies 1–4, participants next evaluated the moral character of the soldiers on either side of the war. More information about the character traits and the results from these judgments is provided in Study 5.

The final set of questions concerned participants' judgments about the decision to enter the war, which functioned as a check on the justness manipulation. Participants were instructed to "please think about each country's **decision to go to war**; i.e. the decision made by government officials and policymakers to go to war," and then responded to the question: "To what extent was the decision of the [defending/invading] country **morally defensible**?" (7-point response scale ranging from 1 = *not at all morally defensible* to 7 = *completely morally defensible*). Participants were also asked a categorical version of this question, to parallel the categorical judgment of the soldiers' conduct. However, responses to this question did not elucidate our main research question beyond responses to the continuous questions, and their analysis is therefore moved to the [online supplemental material](#).

Finally, participants provided demographic information (including age, gender, political orientation, and religiosity)⁵ were asked to indicate honestly whether they had completed the study properly (yes/no) and were debriefed and thanked. No other measures were collected. All these measures were very similar for all studies. Therefore, for the subsequent studies, we only report details of any changes we made to the materials. Full materials and data for all studies are provided on the project's OSF page (osf.io/zwcmv).

Results

In the separate evaluation condition, participants judged that the leaders of the defending country had made a more morally defensible decision to go to war ($M = 5.37$, $SD = 1.58$) than had those from the invading country, $M = 2.24$, $SD = 1.54$; $t(145) = 12.16$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.01$. This same difference was also seen in the joint evaluation condition—defending: $M = 5.82$, $SD = 1.39$; invading: $M = 2.32$, $SD = 1.63$; $F(1, 71) = 151.26$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .68$. Thus, our manipulation of justness was successful; participants clearly judged there to be a just and an unjust side of the war. These manipulations were successful in all studies, accordingly, for Studies 1–5 they are summarized in [Table 1](#) (Study 6 is more complex, and manipulation checks for that study are reported in its Results section).

Contrary to the principle of combatant equality, participants considered it more defensible for soldiers on the defending side to kill soldiers on the invading side (see [Figure 1](#)). This effect was significant in both the separate and joint evaluation conditions—separate evaluation: $M_{\text{defending}} = 5.05$, $SD_{\text{defending}} = 1.77$ vs. $M_{\text{invading}} = 3.65$, $SD_{\text{invading}} = 2.00$, $t(145) = 4.51$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.74$; joint evaluation: $M_{\text{defending}} = 5.43$, $SD_{\text{defending}} = 1.39$ vs. $M_{\text{invading}} = 3.19$, $SD_{\text{invading}} = 1.76$, $t(71) = 8.00$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.94$. The fact that this result was observed in the joint evaluation condition indicates that participants normatively en-

⁵ Further description and analysis of demographic variables is provided in the [online supplemental materials](#).

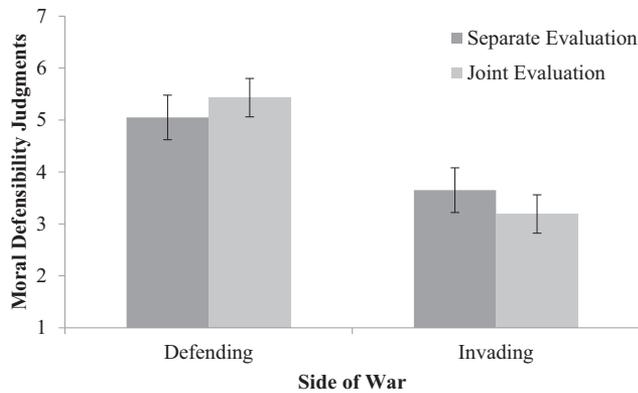


Figure 1. Moral defensibility judgments of the soldiers on the just (defending) and unjust (invading) side of the conflict as a function of evaluation condition (joint vs. separate), Study 1. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals of the mean.

dorsed a different evaluation of soldiers on either side of the conflict. In fact, the difference between judgments of defending and invading soldiers was larger in the joint evaluation than in the separate evaluation condition (joint: $M_{\text{difference}} = 2.24$; separate: $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.40$), $t(216) = 2.50$, $p = .013$.⁶

The results for the moral goodness judgments followed the same pattern as for moral defensibility judgments and are therefore moved to the [online supplemental material](#). Likewise, results for the categorical questions are moved to the online supplemental material, as these did not elucidate our research question further in this study.

Discussion

Overall, the pattern of moral judgments in this study demonstrates that participants judge the actions of soldiers on different sides of a war asymmetrically, in violation of the principle of combatant equality. This difference was clear in both joint and separate evaluation conditions. We also observed strong correlations between judgments of the moral defensibility of soldiers' actions and judgments of the moral defensibility of the decision to enter the war (all r s > .5, see the [online supplemental material](#)), which suggests that people's judgments of individual soldiers' actions are closely related to their view of the war as a whole.

Study 2

Despite the clarity of its results, Study 1 has an important limitation. We only used a single war scenario, in which an aggressor state invaded a defending state in order to gain control over its natural resources. This means that we cannot be certain whether it was the unjust intention behind the invasion, or simply the intervention in sovereign territory itself, which gave rise to the asymmetry in participants' judgments. Accordingly, to disentangle the influence of these two possible sources of the effect, in Study 2 we described a war in which one country invaded another as part of a just humanitarian military intervention. By using a humanitarian military intervention, we also bring the scenario more in line with contemporary Western wars, which typically involve going to

war (with purportedly just intentions) on foreign soil (Wimmer, 2014).

In Study 2, we also elicited abstract judgments about the principle of combatant equality from some participants. Rather than providing participants with a concrete description of an act taken by a particular soldier, we instead described the principle of combatant equality in the abstract and asked participants whether they agreed with it. This allowed an additional test of participants' normative endorsement of this principle.

Method

Participants. Three hundred participants (157 male, 138 female, two other, three missing, $M_{\text{age}} = 34.68$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 16.12$) were recruited through AMT and compensated for their participation. As in Study 1, three participants who indicated that they had not completed the study properly were excluded from analysis. This left a total sample of 297. In the previous study, the effect of side in the separate evaluation conditions was medium-large (Cohen's $d = 0.74$). In the present study, we thus had 99% power to detect this effect in the separate evaluation conditions (independent samples t test; Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007).

Design, materials, and procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions, which consisted of three "concrete" conditions (which matched those in Study 1: a joint evaluation condition, and two separate evaluation conditions), and a new, fourth condition in which they only rendered abstract judgments. The materials and procedure for Study 2 were largely similar to those in Study 1, except for the fact that a different war scenario was described.

In the concrete conditions, the background information depicted a humanitarian military intervention. One country (the unjust side) had systematically oppressed an ethnic minority, and all attempts at diplomacy had failed. Eventually, a neighboring country (the just side) intervened with military force, to prevent genocide of the ethnic minority (see osf.io/zwcmv for full materials). The outcome measures were the same as in Study 1, with the following minor changes. The "just" country was now labeled the "intervening" country throughout, and the unjust country the "resisting" country. Judgments of moral character traits and judgments of actions were counterbalanced—half the participants evaluated the soldiers' character prior to making moral judgments about their actions, whereas the reverse was true for the other participants. (Discussion of the character evaluations is reserved until Study 5.)

In the abstract condition, participants were presented with a short passage outlining in plain language the traditional just war theory position on the independence thesis and the moral equivalence of combatants. The text outlined how traditional just war theorists believe one *should* make moral judgments about the conduct of war, highlighting that judgments about decisions to go

⁶ We calculated the t -statistic for the difference of the differences across joint and separate evaluation conditions using the formula reported by Hsee's (1996), footnote 2: " $t = ((M_{JA} - M_{JB}) - (M_{SA} - M_{SB})) / [(S_J^2/N_J + S_{SA}^2/N_{SA} + S_{SB}^2/N_{SB})]^{1/2}$, where M_{JA} , M_{JB} , M_{SA} and M_{SB} are means for A and for B in joint evaluation and means for A and for B in separate evaluation, respectively; S_J^2 , S_{SA}^2 and S_{SB}^2 are variances; N_J , N_{SA} and N_{SB} are numbers of participants in the joint-, and the two separate-evaluation conditions, respectively." We thank Christopher Hsee and Garry Robins for their assistance in interpreting this formula for use in the present study.

to war should be kept separate from judgments about soldiers' conduct, and explaining how this implies that one should make symmetrical judgments of soldiers on either side of a war. Participants were told the following: "Please note that not everyone agrees with this idea about war! You may disagree or agree for whatever reason—in what follows, we are only interested in your opinion about this idea." Then, their own position was elicited by asking, "Do you agree with the idea described on the previous pages?" Response options were "I agree" or "I disagree," and each response option was accompanied by a short restatement of what agreement or disagreement meant in terms of the independence thesis and the principle of combatant equality. Participants were also given the opportunity to respond to an open-ended question, "If you have anything to add, please write it below." The full text is provided in the [online supplemental material](#).

Next, participants were presented with four statements describing the traditional just war position and asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. These statements were "Decisions to go to war can be considered 'just' or 'unjust,'" "Moral judgments about decisions to go to war should be kept separate from moral judgments about the soldiers' actions," "When judging soldiers, it doesn't matter which side of the war they are on," and "Soldiers on both sides of a war are moral equals." Agreement with the latter three statements indicates agreement with traditional just war theory, and these items formed a reliable scale ($\alpha = .871$). The first statement was not included in the scale because it reflects a position common to both revisionist and traditionalist just war theorists.

Results

Overall, the results mirrored those of Study 1. Participants perceived the justness of the two sides as intended (see [Table 1](#)). And, in both joint and separate evaluation conditions, participants judged the actions of soldiers on the intervening side as more morally defensible and more morally good than those of the soldiers on the resisting side (see [Table 2](#) for continuous judgments). The categorical judgments yielded a similar pattern. In separate evaluation, participants judged the intervening soldier's actions to be morally defensible considerably more often (87.5%) than the resisting soldier's actions (50%), $\chi^2(N = 136) = 23.52$, $p < .001$. In joint evaluation, 54.5% of participants judged the

intervening soldiers' actions as more morally defensible, 11.7% judged the resisting soldiers' actions as more morally defensible, and 33.8% judged the soldiers' actions as equally morally defensible. This distribution of responses was significantly nonuniform, $\chi^2(N = 77) = 21.22$, $p < .001$, and significantly different from what would be expected if the true median response were "equally morally defensible" (one-sample sign test, $p < .001$).

In the abstract condition, 59.5% of participants agreed with the high-level description of just war theory, and the principle of combatant equality. This proportion was marginally greater than a chance level of 50% agreement, $\chi^2(N = 84) = 3.048$, $p = .081$. The responses to the individual statements describing traditional just war theory were more definitive. Mean responses to the composite measure of agreement with traditional just war theory were significantly above the midpoint of the scale (4), $t(83) = 2.780$, $p = .007$, mean difference = 0.41, 95% confidence intervals [CIs] [0.14, 0.82] (see the [online supplemental material](#) for further details).

These results reveal that participants' judgments differed in the concrete and abstract conditions. Whereas 59.9% of participants agreed with an abstract statement of just war theory, including the principle of combatant equality, only 38.8% of participants in the joint evaluation condition made concrete categorical judgments that accorded with this principle. That is, slightly over one third of participants in the joint evaluation condition made the same judgment (on a 7-point scale) of the soldiers on the *just* side as of the soldiers on the *unjust* side. This difference in proportions was reliable, $\chi^2(N = 161) = 5.22$, $p = .022$.

Discussion

In Study 2, we conceptually replicated the findings of Study 1, by showing that asymmetric moral judgments about soldiers extend to a completely different war situation—in this case, a humanitarian military intervention. We also found that these concrete judgments are not matched by individuals' abstract judgments. When given a description of just war theory, including the principle of combatant equality, without any reference to a concrete situation, almost 60% of participants agreed with it. This discrepancy is intriguing and may shed light on the apparent popularity of just war theory—it is appealing in the abstract but less so in concrete circumstances. Because our focus is primarily on people's concrete judgments, in what follows, we set this discrepancy aside

Table 2

Moral Defensibility and Moral Goodness Judgments of the Actions of Soldiers on the Resisting and Intervening Sides of the Conflict, Organized by Evaluation Condition (Joint vs. Separate), Study 2

Condition	<i>M (SD)</i>		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i> ^a
	Intervening (just)	Resisting (unjust)			
Separate conditions ($n_{\text{just}} = 72$, $n_{\text{unjust}} = 64$)					
Moral defensibility judgment	5.36 (1.66)	3.97 (1.89)	4.59	<.001	0.78
Moral goodness judgment	4.49 (1.55)	3.67 (1.76)	2.88	.005	0.49
Joint condition ($n = 77$)					
Moral defensibility judgment	5.13 (1.77)	3.96 (2.04)	4.36	<.001	0.50
Moral goodness judgment	4.18 (1.63)	2.95 (1.47)	4.86	<.001	0.55

Note. See [online supplemental material](#) for these results with age, gender, and political orientation included as covariates.

^a Cohen's *d* corrected for within-subject comparison (Morris & DeShon, 2002).

and focus on various possible explanations of people's concrete judgments.

Study 3

In both Studies 1 and 2 we observed a pronounced asymmetry between concrete judgments of soldiers on either side of a war. In Study 3, we began to examine why this asymmetry emerges. Specifically, we investigated whether participants' neglect of situational constraint might underpin it.

A prototypical justification for the principle of combatant equality is that soldiers on either side of the war are equally compelled by situational constraints to attack their enemy; they each operate under a "shared servitude" (Walzer, 2006). Accordingly, one possible reason why people's descriptive judgments may deviate from this principle is that they either ignore or discount the situational pressures operating on soldiers and presume instead that soldiers independently choose to bring about outcomes that further their own side's cause. This neglect of situational constraint would, in turn, cause people to focus solely on the outcomes that soldiers bring about when evaluating their actions. The soldier on the unjust side would be seen as contributing to a bad outcome (i.e., the unjust country making progress in the war), whereas the soldier on the just side would be seen as contributing to a good outcome (i.e., the just country making progress). And if people see the soldiers as having independently chosen to bring about these outcomes, then they should judge the soldier on the just side more favorably (see McMahan, 2004, 2009, for more on this argument).

This explanation has two parts, that draw on two well-known phenomena—the tendency to judge decision makers on the basis of the outcomes they bring about, even when those outcomes are arguably irrelevant to evaluating decision quality (Baron & Hershey, 1988; see also Cushman, 2008, in the moral domain), and the tendency for people to discount situational factors when explaining others' behavior, often referred to as the "fundamental attribution error" or "correspondence bias" (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Jones & Harris, 1967; Ross, Amabile, & Steinmetz, 1977). In essence, this explanation posits that people focus myopically on outcomes, and either ignore, neglect, or reject the fact that soldiers on both sides of a war are bound by a raft of situational constraints operating on their behavior, or as Walzer (2006) puts it, a "shared servitude." We explored this idea by manipulating situational constraint, in Study 3, and separately, by manipulating soldiers' causal contributions to specific outcomes, in Study 4.

In Study 3, we tested the situational constraint explanation by experimentally manipulating whether the soldiers' acts were ordered by a superior (and thus were situationally constrained), or whether they instead reflected an independent choice on the part of the soldier (and thus were unconstrained). We also independently manipulated the justness of the soldiers' cause (just vs. unjust). If the difference between just and unjust soldiers is significantly weakened when their choices are clearly situationally constrained, then this would demonstrate the relevance of perceived constraint (or the lack thereof) to the original asymmetry. But, if the previously observed asymmetry emerges just as clearly even when participants are explicitly told that soldiers were situationally constrained, this would suggest that constraint is not critical to the explanation of the asymmetry.

This test of mediating processes relies, as do others in this article, on a combination of "blockage" and "enhancement" designs as described by Pirlott and MacKinnon (2016). Our goal was to test whether the asymmetric effect of side (X) on moral judgments (Y) is explained by a particular mediating mechanism (M); in this study, the perception that the soldiers' actions reflected their independent choices. To do this, we held M (independent choice of action) constant across different levels of X (justness of side). In one pair of conditions, soldiers were described as having been entirely constrained (the "blockage" conditions), whereas in the other pair, they were described as having acted freely (the "enhancement" conditions). When both soldiers are described as having been situationally constrained, the ordinary variation in perceptions of choice (M) should be reduced or eliminated, that is, "blocked" by the experimental manipulation. Consequently, the overall effect of X (side) on Y (moral judgments) should be reduced within these "constrained" conditions.

In contrast, when each soldier is described as having acted independently, the effect of the side manipulation should be "enhanced": The perception that they each independently chose the outcomes they caused (good vs. bad) should be bolstered, and so we should expect that the effect of the independent variable (side) should be stronger when examining the "free choice" conditions. Thus, if an interaction between side and constraint were to emerge on moral defensibility judgments, this would provide evidence supporting the notion that perceived choice is functioning as a mediator (Pirlott & MacKinnon, 2016).⁷ If on the other hand, the effect of side on defensibility judgments is unchanged across the manipulation of constraint/choice, then this would provide *prima facie* (though not definitive) evidence that this variable is not the mediator. This experimental strategy is also known as "testing-a-process-hypothesis-by-an-interaction" (Jacoby & Sassenberg, 2011).

In Study 3, we also examined a much wider variety of different actions taken in war. The first two studies elicited judgments about the generic action of one soldier killing an enemy soldier. However, killing the enemy is not the only sort of action undertaken by soldiers in war. Soldiers' actions vary widely in their moral prop-

⁷ The reason we describe this design (and others in this paper) as combining "blockage" and "enhancement" manipulations is as follows. According to Pirlott and MacKinnon's (2016) nomenclature, a *blockage design* consists of a comparison between conditions in which a candidate mediating variable is blocked by an experimental manipulation and a control condition in which the mediator is allowed to vary freely as function of the manipulation. Similarly, an *enhancement design* consists of a comparison between conditions in which the candidate mediating variable is fixed in a way that is likely to enhance the effect of the manipulated independent variable, and a control condition in which it varies freely. The designs we used in the present study, as well as in those that follow do not include such true control conditions. Instead, they include the "blockage" conditions and the "enhancement" conditions, but not the control conditions. For instance, in Study 3 (the present study), the soldiers' independent volition is blocked in the condition in which he is ordered to act (see below), which should reduce the effect of side (relative to hypothetical true control conditions); but it is enhanced in the condition in which he acts freely, which should enhance the effect of side relative to (hypothetical) true control conditions. Strictly speaking, therefore, these designs are a hybrid, comprised of both blockage and enhancement elements. Notably, these sorts of design maximize the variation of the purported mediator, thereby maximizing the chances of finding evidence supporting mediation. This in turn means that our failure to find effects of several of these various mediators has particularly strong evidentiary value.

erties. They range from grave moral offenses, such as defiling corpses or killing innocent noncombatants, to acts of tremendous heroism and sacrifice, such as helping enemy civilians, sacrificing one's own life for one's comrades, or reporting potential war crimes. In Study 3, we examined how broadly the asymmetry observed in the previous studies extends across a wide range of actions. One possibility of particular interest is that some actions may be so morally abhorrent (or alternatively, so morally laudable) that they are seen as indefensible (or defensible) no matter which side the soldier is on.

Method

Participants. Four hundred and twenty two participants (243 male, 179 female, $M_{\text{age}} = 35.41$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.72$) were recruited through AMT and compensated for their participation. Seven participants indicated that they had not completed the study properly and were removed from the analyses. We also filtered out 47 participants who responded incorrectly to at least one of the attention check items, leaving a final N of 368. Participants were randomly assigned to receive only a subset of the full set of scenarios, and so the total sample size ensured that each scenario was responded to by a reasonable number of participants (N for each scenario ranged from 114 to 132).

Design, materials, and procedure. Participants first read a scenario describing a war in which there was one clearly just and one clearly unjust country. The scenario involved the humanitarian military intervention from Study 2, in which the intervening country acted justly to prevent a genocide in the resisting country. In this study, the resisting country also responded to the intervention by making incursions into the intervening country's territory. Participants first made moral judgments about each side's decision to enter the war (a manipulation check on justness, see Table 1), in a random order.

Next, participants evaluated the actions of soldiers. They were randomly assigned to evaluate soldiers from either the just (intervening) or unjust (resisting) side. Participants evaluated eight actions performed by a soldier from the side to which they were assigned. Introductory instructions informed them to treat each scenario as a new case, so that they did not presume that it was the same soldier acting in each case. Each participant was presented randomly with eight out of a total set of 24 scenarios. We selected a range of different actions, ranging widely in their morality, from gravely immoral (even evil) to supererogatory and heroic. The scenarios were derived from previous research (e.g., successful torture; Pratto & Glasford, 2008), the Geneva Conventions on conflict in war (e.g., regarding protections for the wounded, executions, Article 6: Additional Protocol II, 1977; Article 10: Additional Protocol I, 1977) and recent occurrences in contemporary wars (e.g., whistleblowing, Langewiesche, 2015; defiling corpses, Bowley & Rosenberg, 2012; drone warfare, Shane, 2012). A brief description of all 24 scenarios is provided in the online supplemental material, and full materials can be seen at osf.io/zwcmv.

Situational constraint was manipulated as follows. For half the participants, each soldier was described as acting on his own independent volition: "The soldier decides that he will [action]. He follows through on his decision, and [action]"; whereas for the other half of participants, each soldier was described as being ordered to act: "The soldier is ordered by his superior officer to

[action]. He obeys the order, and [action]." For each scenario, participants made a moral judgment about the defensibility and moral goodness (vs. badness) of the soldier's action (the same continuous items as in Study 1) and evaluated the soldier's character (to be discussed further in Study 5). After responding to eight scenarios, participants completed two attention checks (they were asked to indicate on which side of the war the soldier was fighting and whether he was ordered to act or acted on his own decision). They then provided demographic information, indicated whether they had completed the study properly, and were debriefed and thanked.

Results

As in the previous studies, the main outcome variable was moral defensibility judgments of the soldiers' actions. Figure 2 presents the mean moral defensibility judgment for each scenario, broken down by condition.

Because each participant in this study responded to several scenarios, the data is doubly nested: within scenarios and within participants. That is, there are some nonindependent aspects of the design, in that responses "within" each participant are likely to be more similar to each other, and responses "within" each scenario are likely to be more similar to each other. To take this dependence into account, we analyzed the data using generalized linear mixed-effects models in R (Bates, Mächler, Bolker, & Walker, 2015), modeling scenario and participant as random effects. The data and syntax files for these analyses are available on the Open Science Framework (long form data set and code book: osf.io/2vz7c; R syntax file for analyses: osf.io/czyu2).

First, we fitted a null model, in which moral defensibility was predicted only by participant and scenario random effects. Then, we added side as a fixed effect to this model. This model was a significantly better fit to the data than the null model, $\chi^2(1) = 47.73$, $p < .001$, indicating a main effect of side: As in previous studies, we observe an asymmetry in judgments such that the actions of soldiers on the just side are overall more morally defensible than those of soldiers on the unjust side. Next, we performed the same comparison with situational constraint as a fixed effect. This model was not a significantly better fit to the data than the null model, $\chi^2(1) = 1.40$, $p = .237$. We thus have no evidence that a soldier's being ordered to act influenced overall judgments of his actions. However, the crucial test for this study is whether order interacts with side. To test this, we compared a model which included side, order, and their interaction (as well as participant and scenario as random effects), to a model that included only the main effects (as well as the random effects). The model which included the interaction was not a significantly better fit to the data, $\chi^2(1) = 0.63$, $p = .427$.⁸

In addition to the overall effect of side, as can be seen in Figure 2 (and in the online supplemental materials) there was an effect of side for the majority of the scenarios, with the exceptions clustering at the most and least morally defensible poles. This appears

⁸ In the online supplemental materials we also report analyses using by-scenario data (in which responses are averaged across multiple participants for each scenario) and by-participant data (in which each scenario is analyzed separately). Overall, these analyses are consistent with the ones reported here.

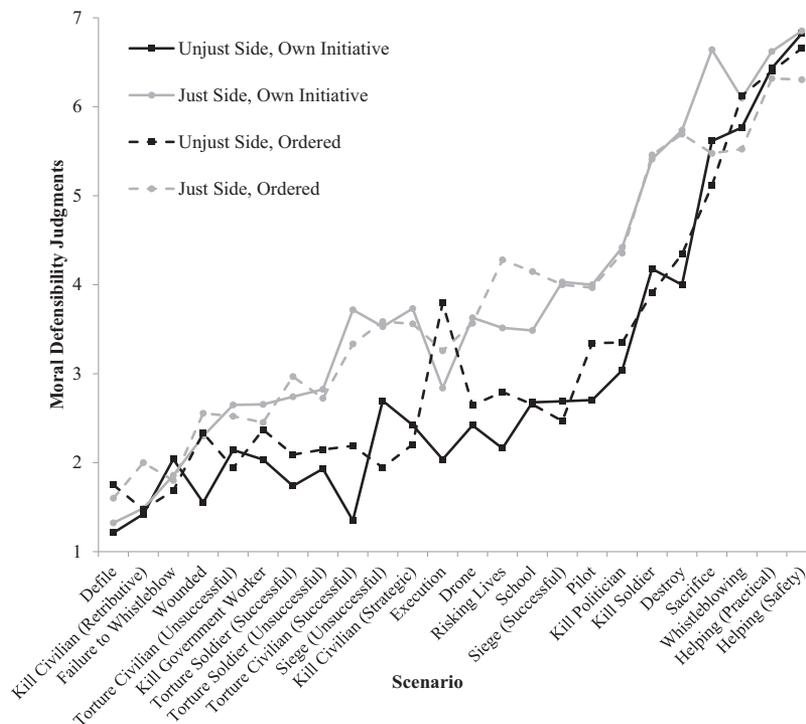


Figure 2. Moral defensibility judgments for each scenario, as a function of condition, in Study 3. Scenarios are ordered by average moral defensibility, from least morally defensible (left) to most morally defensible (right). Error bars are omitted in the interest of clarity, however see [Supplemental Figures S2 and S3](#) in the online supplemental material for more details.

consistent with the possibility that some actions may be so morally abhorrent that they are seen as indefensible for all soldiers (and conversely for the laudable actions). We tested this idea formally in two steps. First, we fitted a model in which the effect of side was set to vary by scenario. This model was a better fit than the corresponding model with the effect of side fixed across scenarios, $\chi^2(5) = 67.31, p < .001$, indicating that the size of the asymmetry depends on the scenario. Second, in a by-scenario analysis, we used judgments of the moral extremity of each action (the absolute value of participants' average judgments of moral goodness vs. badness for that action) as a predictor of the effect of side on moral defensibility, in a linear regression. This analysis revealed that the size of the side effect was indeed predicted by moral extremity, $\beta = -.715, t(22) = -4.796, p < .001$. Thus, as we had suspected, as an action becomes extreme (either in the good or bad direction), the asymmetry between either side decreased.

Discussion

Study 3 conceptually replicated the results of the previous studies, across a range of different actions: Soldiers fighting for just causes were seen as acting more defensibly than soldiers fighting for unjust causes, even when carrying out identical actions. This result once again demonstrates that participants do not follow the principle of combatant equality. In this study, we also discovered an important boundary condition on this asymmetry: Some actions were perceived to be so morally abhorrent, or, conversely, so morally laudable, that judgments of soldiers engag-

ing in these actions were not influenced by the justness of the side for which he was fighting.⁹

However, we did not find that a manipulation of situational constraints interacted with the justness of the soldiers' cause. We had hypothesized that the effect of side might be reduced in the high constraint case (because the soldiers' "shared servitude" becomes more obvious). However, we did not find evidence for such moderation, nor was there an overall effect of the constraint manipulation on moral defensibility judgments. It thus seems unlikely that a failure to recognize soldiers' shared servitude is contributing to the asymmetry in moral defensibility judgments.

Supplemental Study 1. In a separate study, we further assessed the effect of situational constraint using a correlational design: We measured the extent to which participants generally perceive soldiers to be situationally constrained in their actions, and examined whether this individual difference variable moderated the discrepancy in judgments between soldiers on just and unjust sides of a war. If variation in the recognition of situational constraints underpins the asymmetry, then the asymmetry should

⁹ We are not aware of just war theorizing that pertains specifically to the more abhorrent, or more laudable, acts we used in Study 3; revisionist versus traditionalist arguments are generally about legal actions such as killing enemy soldiers. Neither revisionist nor traditionalist just war theorists claim that symmetric or asymmetric judgments should be made for all actions; for instance, both are likely to agree that some acts are so morally abhorrent that they are impermissible and worthy of condemnation for all combatants or whoever engages in them.

be larger when situational constraint is judged to be low (i.e., neglected), and smaller when situational constraint is judged to be high. This study was preregistered using AsPredicted.org (Simonsohn, Simmons, & Nelson, 2017); the preregistration document and full materials and results are provided in the [online supplemental material](#), as well as details of two minor divergences from the preregistered analysis plan.

Participants ($n = 433$) first completed a four-item scale assessing perceived constraint (e.g., “To what extent are soldiers driven by situational pressure when they fight during a war?,” $\alpha = .626$). Responses were made on a 7-point scale, with higher numbers indicating greater constraint. Participants then read a war scenario with a clear just and unjust side and made a moral defensibility judgment of the actions of a soldier from either the just or the unjust side when he killed an opposing soldier (1 = *not at all morally defensible*, 7 = *completely morally defensible*). Consistent with the earlier studies, there was a main effect of side, such that participants judged the soldier on the just side more leniently ($M = 5.55$, $SD = 1.43$) than the soldier on the unjust side, $M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.82$; $t(432) = 9.615$, $p < .001$.

Contrary to our expectations, perceived constraint was generally high; it therefore does not appear that participants generally neglect situational constraint when considering soldiers fighting in war, M constraint = 5.36, $SD = 0.86$, M difference from midpoint (4) = 1.36, 95% CI [1.28, 1.44], $t(431) = 33.03$, $p < .001$. We used Hayes (2012) PROCESS Macro for SPSS to test whether the mean-centered composite constraint measure moderated the effect of side on moral defensibility judgments. The interaction term was not significant (effect estimate = .223, $F(1, 428) = 1.51$, $p = .219$), indicating that the effect of side on moral defensibility judgment did not depend on the degree of perceived constraint. The direct effect of side on moral defensibility remained significant in this analysis (effect estimate = 1.479, $p < .001$), and the direct effect of constraint was not significant (effect estimate = 0.150, $p = .244$). Given these results, and that the constraint manipulation in Study 3 was not especially compelling, we turn to other possible explanations in the studies that follow.

Study 4

Our manipulation in the previous study was based on the hypothesis that people would only hold soldiers responsible for contributing to bad (and, conversely, good) outcomes if the soldiers were making an independent choice to act, rather than being ordered to act (i.e., being situationally constrained). By increasing situational constraints, our goal was to weaken the causal contribution made by the target soldier (since much of the causal contribution should get reassigned to the commanding officer), and thus reduce the asymmetry between the just and unjust soldiers. As we saw, this manipulation did not have the anticipated effect. In Study 4, we explored causality directly, by manipulating each soldier’s proximate causal contribution to a relevant war outcome, while also separately manipulating the extent to which the target soldier identified with (endorsed or rejected) his country’s war effort.

Under normal circumstances, an individual soldier’s actions are often the sole and sufficient cause of enemy deaths, for example, a single soldier’s bullet(s) causes the death of an enemy soldier. However, this is not always the case—sometimes multiple sol-

diers’ actions jointly contribute to the death of a single enemy, with each soldier’s action being a necessary factor in causing death. In other cases, a particular killing may be “overdetermined,” such that it is brought about by multiple causes, any of which alone would be sufficient to cause death. And in still other cases, a possible cause of death may be causally preceded by another cause, rendering the original cause actually inert, yet counterfactually sufficient, to cause death. In this latter case, an individual soldier’s causal contribution to the resultant death seems diminished in comparison with the sole cause, or multiple necessary cause cases.

In Study 4, we made use of the possibility of causal precedence, by specifying that a target soldier’s action, though it would alone have been sufficient to kill the enemy, was immediately preceded by another sufficient cause of death (see Alicke, Rose, & Bloom, 2011). As a consequence, the target soldier’s actual causal contribution to the outcome is necessarily diminished. If causal contribution to war outcomes is a key factor underlying the asymmetry previously observed, then the asymmetry should be attenuated in these causal precedence cases as compared with more standard cases of killing.

We also investigated another possible cause of the asymmetry, namely soldiers’ presumed identification with, or endorsement of, the cause for which they are fighting. Actors’ identification with their bad actions is known to affect moral judgments—for instance, actors who identify with their bad actions are judged more morally responsible for them, even when their actions are entirely situationally constrained (e.g., when they are compelled or coerced; Woolfolk, Doris, & Darley, 2006). In the present context, even if people recognize that soldiers’ actions are fully situationally constrained, their implicit presumptions about soldiers’ attitudes might be partially responsible for the observed asymmetry. Soldiers who fight for a just cause may be presumed to identify with that cause, thereby possessing commendable attitudes, whereas soldiers who fight for an unjust cause may be presumed to identify with it, thereby possessing much less commendable attitudes.¹⁰ These presumed attitudes, in turn, might influence judgments of the defensibility of the soldiers’ actual conduct. If presumed identification of this sort partially underlies the asymmetry, then a manipulation that reverses these presumptions, and that states explicitly that soldiers reject the cause for which they are fighting, should reduce the observed asymmetry.

¹⁰ We tested this presumption in a short pilot study. Three hundred participants were presented with a description of the same war as in Study 3 and were then asked to evaluate the extent to which either a soldier on the just side, or on the unjust side, identified with his own country’s cause for war (three items, e.g., “To what extent do you think the soldier endorses each country’s war effort?,” ranging from 1 = *fully endorses the invading country’s war effort* to 7 = *fully endorses the defending country’s war effort*; $\alpha = .944$). Participants responded on 7-point response scales. As expected, soldiers on the unjust side were perceived to identify with their own side ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.49$; M difference from midpoint = -0.921 , 95% CI [-1.179 , -0.664]; $t(130) = -7.078$, $p < .001$), as were soldiers on the just side, $M = 6.09$, $SD = 0.99$; Mean difference from midpoint = 2.088, 95% CI [1.920, 2.256]; $t(136) = 24.570$, $p < .001$. Full materials and results of this study are provided at osf.io/zwcmv, and in the [online supplemental materials](#).

Method

Participants. Three hundred and sixty participants (188 male, 171 female, one other, $M_{\text{age}} = 35.71$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.09$) were recruited through AMT and compensated for their participation. Participants who indicated that they had not completed the study properly ($n = 2$) or who failed any of the attention checks described below were filtered out ($n = 66$), leaving a total N of 292. The initial sample size was selected so as to have at least 50 participants per cell for the two separate two-way interactions we were most concerned with. However, with the exclusions we did not quite meet this target: A sample size of 292 yields 73 per cell for the side by causal contribution interaction, and 48 per cell for the side by identification interaction (see below).

Design, materials, and procedure. The full design of the study was a 2 (side: just vs. unjust) \times 2 (causal contribution: full contribution vs. no contribution) \times 3 (identification: endorses vs. suspends vs. rejects), with all variables manipulated between participants. Participants first read a scenario describing a war in which there was one clearly just and one clearly unjust country (the same war as in Study 1; a war in which one country invaded another to take control over its gas deposits). As a manipulation check, participants first judged the moral defensibility of each country's decision to go to war, in a random order (see Table 1).

Participants were then provided with a description of a soldier fighting for one side of this war. In all cases, the soldier was described as a sniper who had been recruited for a special mission for his country, having been drafted into his country's army at the start of the war. The soldier's mission was to shoot and kill a high-ranking and experienced military general (a "high value target") from the enemy side. In all cases, the soldier successfully shot the general. However, he was not always the one responsible for actually killing him—we manipulated the soldier's causal contribution to this outcome by making use of a "causal precedence" technique (Alicke et al., 2011).

Half the participants were randomly assigned to the *full contribution* condition, in which they read that the enemy general died directly as a result of the target soldier's bullet. There was also a backup sniper who concurrently fired at the general, but this second sniper's bullet hit the general a split second after the target

soldier's bullet. Thus, because the target soldier's shot had immediately killed the general, only he had directly contributed to the strategic advantage gained by his country. The remaining participants were assigned to the *no contribution* condition. All details were identical except that the target soldier's bullet struck the general a split-second *after* the backup sniper's bullet. Because the backup sniper's shot had immediately killed the general, only he had directly contributed to the strategic advantage gained, whereas the target soldier had not.

Independent of this manipulation of causal contribution, we also manipulated the soldiers' identification with their country's war effort. This manipulation occurred prior to the description of the killing. In all cases, the soldier was described as having carefully thought through the information available about the war, to weigh the costs and benefits of the war effort. The soldier was then described as having subsequently endorsed, rejected, or suspended judgment about his country's war effort, for example, "he believes that the decision-makers in his country made the right [wrong] decision to enter the war." In all cases, the soldier was described as having a strong sense of duty to his country, and as feeling obligated to take part in his assigned mission in order to carry out his job—notwithstanding the variation in levels of his identification. Full materials can be found at osf.io/zwcmv.

Following these descriptions, participants made judgments about the moral defensibility and moral goodness of the soldier's shooting of the general (continuous measures as in previous studies), and they evaluated the soldier's moral character (to be discussed further in Study 5). They then completed attention checks for each of the manipulated variables (side, identification, contribution), provided demographic information, indicated whether they had completed the study properly, and were debriefed and thanked.

Results

Replicating the previous results, and as shown in Figure 3, participants judged the actions of the soldier on the just side as more morally defensible ($M = 5.42$, $SD = 1.40$) than the actions of the soldier on the unjust side, $M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.85$, $F(1, 280) = 138.70$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .33$. There were no main

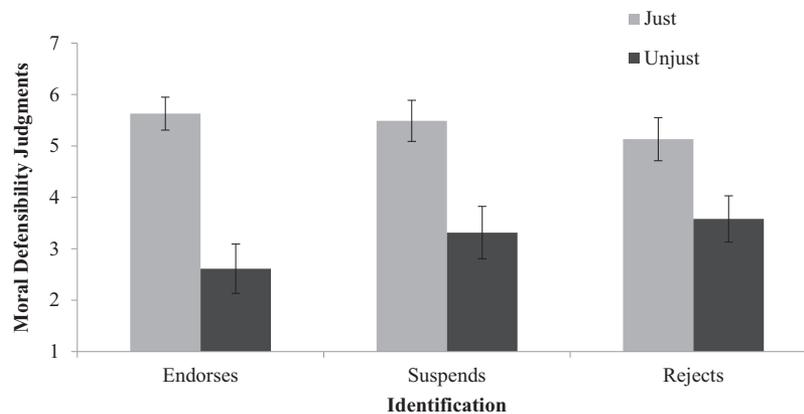


Figure 3. The effect of side (just vs. unjust) on moral defensibility judgments, across the three identification conditions in Study 4. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals of the mean.

effects of identification or causal contribution on moral defensibility judgments (identification: $F[2, 280] = 0.748, p = .474, \eta_p^2 = .01$, causal contribution: $F[1, 280] = 2.211, p = .138, \eta_p^2 = .01$), notwithstanding the fact that all participants in these analyses passed attention checks for these variables. However, as predicted, there was a significant identification by side interaction, $F(2, 280) = 5.827, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = .04$. As shown in Figure 3, in each of the identification conditions, there was a significant effect of side, but the magnitude of this effect decreased as the soldiers' identification with his country's cause decreased—endorse: $F(1, 107) = 108.29, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .50$; suspends: $F(1, 74) = 32.99, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .31$; and rejects: $F(1, 99) = 23.04, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .19$. There was no interaction between side and causal contribution, $F(1, 280) = 0.516, p = .473, \eta_p^2 < .01$, nor any three-way interaction, $F(2, 280) = 0.134, p = .874, \eta_p^2 < .01$. Both when the soldier contributed—just: $M = 5.64, SD = 1.37$; unjust: $M = 3.21, SD = 1.74; t(144) = 9.421, p < .001, d = 1.55$ —and when he did not—just: $M = 5.22, SD = 1.40$; unjust: $M = 3.09, SD = 1.97; t(144) = 7.614, p < .001, d = 1.24$ —the effect of side was strong. Responses to the moral goodness item followed the same pattern and are described in the [online supplemental material](#).

Discussion

Overall, then, we found no effect of the soldiers' causal contribution to their country's war effort, and no interaction of this factor with side. The asymmetry in judgments of soldiers on the just and unjust sides was just as strong, regardless of the causal contribution their actions made to killing their enemy.

However, the results of Study 4 suggest that part of the asymmetry in moral judgments of soldiers on just and unjust sides of a war can be explained by participants presuming that soldiers endorse their own country's cause for war. When this presumption was reinforced, the asymmetry was at its largest. When it was held in abeyance (with the soldier explicitly withholding identification), the asymmetry was of middling size. But, when this presumption was explicitly overturned, with both soldiers rejecting their country's cause for war, the asymmetry was significantly attenuated. However, this does not appear to be the full explanation for the asymmetry: The effect of side on moral defensibility was significant even when both soldiers rejected their country's cause for war.

Supplemental Study 2. In a follow-up study ($N = 545$) we aimed to amplify this effect of identification, by having the soldier publicly express his attitude (endorsement or opposition) toward the war in which he was fighting. He was described as either participating in a protest, or a celebratory event, in response to his country's involvement in the war. Participants were assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (side: just vs. unjust) \times 2 (identification: endorse vs. reject) fully between-subjects design. They first read about a war in which a small country was invaded by a neighboring country seeking to expand its territory and gain control over more natural resources. When diplomatic solutions failed, a third non-neighboring country decided to intervene militarily to defend the small country. They were then randomly assigned to judge a target soldier either from the third intervening country (the just country), or from the aggressor invading country (the unjust country), who killed an enemy soldier (1 = *not at all morally defensible*, 7 = *completely morally defensible*). Independent of the

side manipulation, the target soldier was described as either endorsing his country's cause for war (he publicly celebrated it) or rejecting it (he publicly protested it).

In line with the results of Study 4, we predicted that this manipulation of identification would interact with the justness of side manipulation, such that the effect of side would be attenuated when the soldier opposed the war in which he was fighting. Because of the public nature of the endorsement in this study, we surmised that this interaction would be stronger than in Study 4, and that the asymmetry would be more noticeably reduced, and possibly even eliminated, in the condition in which the soldier opposed his own side's cause for war. We again found that participants judged the soldier on the just side to have acted more defensibly, $M = 5.55, SD = 1.43$, than the soldier on the unjust side, $M = 3.55, SD = 1.88, F(1, 541) = 202.052, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .27$. The key interaction between identification and side was also significant, $F(1, 541) = 13.809, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .03$. The difference in judgments between the soldiers on the just and unjust sides was reliable both when the soldier endorsed his side's cause, $t(270) = 13.287, p < .001, d = 1.62$, and when he rejected it, $t(271) = 7.114, p < .001, d = 0.86$, but it was significantly attenuated in the reject condition. This result is once again consistent with identification partially explaining the asymmetry. However, the overall size of the interaction, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, was no greater than it had been in Study 4, $\eta_p^2 = .04$, suggesting that making identification (or its opposite) public had no bearing on the results. Full details of this study are provided in the [online supplemental material](#).

Summary. Study 4 and Supplemental Study 2 show that when soldiers on the just and unjust sides of a war both reject their country's cause for war (i.e., they *do not* identify with it and are fighting merely out of a sense of duty), the perceived difference between the moral defensibility of their actions is significantly attenuated as compared with a condition in which they both endorse their country's cause for war. This attenuation arises principally because the soldiers on the unjust side who reject their side's cause are viewed as acting more morally defensibly than their comrades who endorse it. These results thus elucidate one cause of the asymmetry, namely that soldiers are presumed by default to identify with their own side (see Footnote 10), and their actions are then judged as a function of those presumed attitudes. This is not a complete explanation, because the asymmetry was only attenuated and not eliminated with this default attitudinal presumption was overturned. In the next study, we take a broader look at the assumptions people make about soldiers, not just about their attitudes toward the war, but about their moral character more generally.

Study 5

In the present study, we extended the investigations of the asymmetry between soldiers on just and unjust sides of a war to a new outcome measure: character evaluations of the soldier. Our aim was to answer two questions: Are soldiers on the unjust side of a war generally seen as having worse moral character than soldiers on the just side? And if so, could this factor be part of the explanation for the asymmetry? That is, if soldiers on the just side of the war are implicitly presumed to have better global moral character than are soldiers on the unjust side (separate from any

specific attitudes they might have toward the war itself), then this might in turn influence judgments of those soldiers' actions during war.

This explanation may not be rational, because it is not entirely clear why soldiers fighting for one side or the other should be seen as having different moral characters, nor if they do, why this should influence judgments of their specific actions during war. Nevertheless, there is evidence that global character information can influence moral judgments of actions, even when that character information has no relevance to the actions in question (Nadler & McDonnell, 2012). And global character information is known to be highly relevant to person perception and moral judgment more generally (Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014; Uhlmann, Pizarro, & Diermeier, 2015; Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998). Thus, it seemed possible that character inferences could comprise part of the explanation of the observed asymmetry.

We investigated this possibility with both mediation evidence and an experimental manipulation. In all previous studies (except Supplemental Study 1), we asked participants to make judgments about the soldiers' character, in addition to their acts. We first summarize the results from these prior studies and examine what evidence they provide for character evaluations explaining the asymmetry (Study 5a). Then, in Study 5b, we manipulate the global moral character of the target soldiers to investigate this factor experimentally.

Study 5a: Summary of Prior Studies

The character judgments we elicited in previous studies were divided into two sorts, reflecting a previous distinction made in the literature between *core goodness* traits (e.g., kindness, honesty, compassion, trustworthiness) and *value commitment* traits (e.g., dedication, commitment, courage; see Piazza, Goodwin, Rozin, & Royzman, 2014).¹¹ We expected that if any differences between soldiers on the just and unjust sides were to be found, they would be revealed on judgments of core goodness traits rather than value commitment traits—there is no reason to expect soldiers fighting for the unjust side to be less courageous or dedicated, but there is perhaps reason to see them as less good overall (though see Watkins & Laham, 2018b).

In all studies, the two sets of traits were positively correlated (r s between aggregated ratings of the traits ranged from .299 to .850; descriptive statistics are provided in the online supplemental material). We therefore investigated the effect of side on goodness traits after shared variance with dedication traits had been partialled out (and vice versa). The results of these analyses are summarized in Figure 4. As can be seen, the unique effect of side on goodness traits was sizable; the meta-analytic effect size was 0.383, 95% CI [0.279, 0.487].¹² However, the unique effect on dedication traits was not significant overall, effect size estimate = -0.022 , 95% CI [-0.070 , 0.026] (Neyeloff, Fuchs, & Moreira, 2012). Overall, these analyses indicate that the previously observed asymmetry does extend to character evaluations, but primarily to evaluations of a soldier's core goodness, and not those of his dedication or competence.

We next conducted mediation analyses to determine whether these character evaluations were able to explain the observed asymmetry in moral defensibility judgments. In each of Studies 1–4 and Supplemental Study 2, we observed an indirect effect of side on moral defensibility judgments, through evaluations of goodness traits (see the online supplemental material). The corre-

sponding indirect effect through dedication traits was consistently much smaller and was significant in only one study out of the five (Study 3). These results align with the possibility that the asymmetry occurs because the soldier on the just side is imbued with the moral goodness of his own side (and vice versa for soldiers on the unjust side). However, having only measured evaluations of character, we cannot make any causal claims about this mediating process. In the next study, we therefore manipulated the soldiers' character directly, to investigate whether his having a good or bad character can attenuate the asymmetry.

Study 5b: Experimental Manipulation of Global Character

To go beyond the merely correlational analyses in the prior studies, Study 5b manipulated background information about the target soldiers' moral character. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: Two experimental conditions in which they were informed either that the soldier had a good moral character (i.e., kind, honest, principled), or that he had a bad moral character (i.e., cruel, dishonest, unprincipled), or a third, control condition in which no character information was provided. If the asymmetry in moral defensibility judgments results from participants inferring something about soldiers' global moral character from the side for which they are fighting, then providing strong, prior information about a target soldier's moral character should constrain (or even overturn) these inferences and attenuate the asymmetry.

Method

Participants. Six hundred and three participants were recruited through AMT and compensated for their participation (305 men, 295 women, three other; $M_{\text{age}} = 35.51$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.65$). One hundred and one participants answered at least one attention check incorrectly, leaving a total sample of 502.

Materials and procedure. In contrast to the previous studies, participants were first introduced to an individual soldier, before being given information about the war in which he was fighting. In the two experimental conditions, the soldier was described as having a morally good or a morally bad character, to target the core goodness traits we assessed in the previous studies. For example, the "good character" paragraph emphasized his kindness, integrity, and honesty, whereas the "bad character" paragraph emphasized his dishonesty, cruelty, and unscrupulousness (see osf.io/zwcmv for full materials). Following this description, participants responded to a manipulation check about the soldier's moral char-

¹¹ The exact traits rated by participants varied across the previous studies: In Studies 1 and 2, participants rated the target soldiers on 10 traits. Based on exploratory factor analyses (EFAs), for Studies 3, 4, and Supplemental Study 2, we then reduced the set of traits down to two for goodness (*principled, kind*) and two for strength of character (*capable, dedicated*), in line with theory (Piazza et al., 2014). Full details of these rating scales and EFAs are provided in the online supplemental material.

¹² This estimate is from a random effects analysis, as the fixed effects analysis indicated substantial heterogeneity in effect sizes, $Q = 26.225$, $p < .001$, $I^2 = 80.93$ (effect estimate from fixed effect model: 0.353, 95% CI [0.306, 0.400]). More details about these analyses are presented in the online supplemental material.

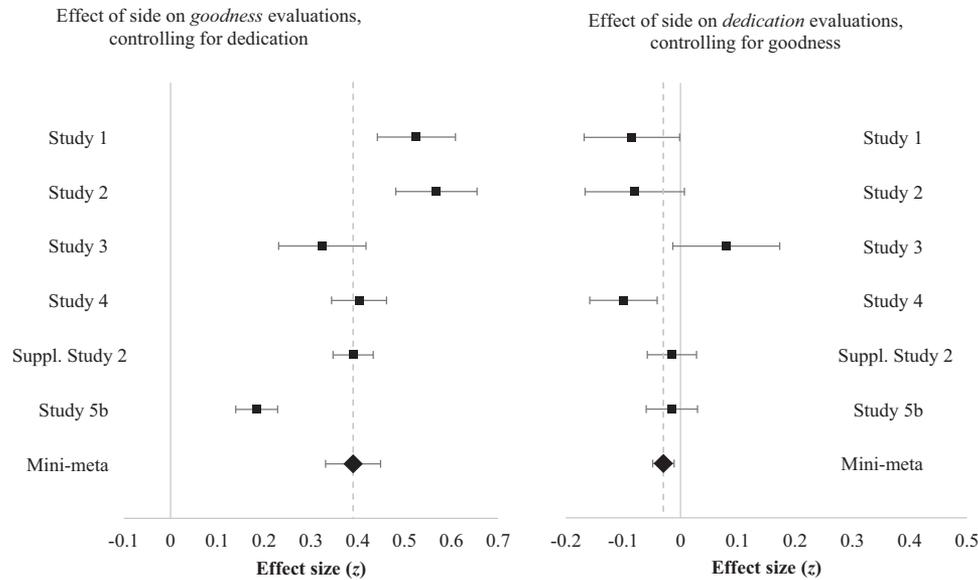


Figure 4. Forest plots displaying the effect of side (Fisher's z) on goodness, partialing out dedication (left hand side), and on dedication, partialing out goodness (right hand side). Error bars indicate standard errors. For Studies 1 and 2, we include the effects only in the separate evaluation conditions. For Study 3, we include the effects only for the scenario in which the target soldier killed an enemy soldier. We also report the results of Study 5b in these graphs, so that they provide a full overview of the effects.

acter on a 7-point response scale, ranging from 1 = *very morally bad* to 7 = *very morally good*. In the control condition, participants were not given any information about the soldier's moral character but were simply asked to make their best guess about it.

Next, participants were asked to imagine that the target soldier's country was involved in a war similar to that described in Studies 1 and 4 and were randomly assigned to read that the target soldier was from the defending or invading country. They also read that "the soldier is aware of his country's reasons for going to war, but he is currently undecided about whether he would reject or endorse the overall war effort." Then, participants read that the target soldier had shot and killed an enemy soldier.

The outcome measures were moral defensibility judgments regarding the soldier's action (1 = *not at all morally defensible*, 7 = *completely morally defensible*), and moral character ratings of him (*kind*, *principled*, *dedicated*, *competent*, also on 7-point scales ranging from *not at all* [trait] to *extremely* [trait]); these moral character ratings were additional to those asked initially as a manipulation check. Finally, participants made defensibility judgments regarding each country's decision to enter the war (see Table 1 for results), completed two attention checks (indicating on which side of the war the soldier was fighting, and how he felt about his country's cause for war), provided demographic information, and were debriefed and thanked.

Results

The manipulation of moral character was successful, $F(2, 498) = 1657.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .87$: In the neutral condition, participants gave initial character ratings that were slightly higher than the midpoint (4) of the scale, $M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.08$; M

difference = 0.90, 95% CI [0.74, 1.07]; $t(166) = 10.85$, $p < .001$. The soldier with bad character was rated as significantly worse than the scale midpoint ($M = 1.43$, $SD = 0.84$; M difference = -2.57 , 95% CI [-2.69 , -2.44]; $t(172) = -40.33$, $p < .001$), whereas the soldier with good character was rated as significantly better, $M = 6.66$, $SD = 0.53$; M difference = 2.66, 95% CI [2.58, 2.74]; $t(160) = 64.169$, $p < .001$.

Descriptive statistics for moral defensibility judgments are presented in Table 3. Consistent with the previous studies, the actions of the soldier on the just side were rated as more morally defensible than those of the soldier on the unjust side, $F(1, 495) = 136.84$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .22$. There was also a main effect of character, such that the actions of the soldier with good character were rated as more defensible than those of the soldier with bad character, $F(2, 495) = 5.68$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. However, there was no significant interaction between side and moral character, $F(2, 495) = 0.061$, $p = .941$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$. The effect of side was significant for all

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Moral Defensibility Judgments of the Actions of Soldiers on the Just and Unjust Sides, Across Three Different Character Conditions, Study 5b

Character conditions	M (SD)		t	p	d
	Defending	Invading			
Good ($n = 162$)	5.88 (1.36)	4.30 (1.60)	6.525	<.001	1.04
Neutral ($n = 167$)	5.49 (1.39)	3.79 (1.73)	7.029	<.001	1.10
Bad ($n = 172$)	5.37 (1.49)	3.72 (1.82)	6.771	<.001	1.04

Note. These effects all held when age, gender, and political orientation were included as covariates.

character conditions (see Table 3) and was not attenuated in either case when the soldier's overall character was described first.

As our manipulation of character did not interact with side to influence the asymmetry in moral judgments, further analyses of the character evaluations and of the relationship between character evaluations and moral judgments are presented in the [online supplemental material](#).

Discussion

A manipulation of background character information did not attenuate the asymmetry observed in prior studies. Although participants did take this character information into account—judging the good soldier's actions (and his character) as more defensible (and better) than the bad soldier's (see the [online supplemental material](#))—the character manipulation did not significantly moderate the effect of side, which was significant in all conditions. It appears, then, that although character evaluations and moral defensibility judgments are related (as additional mediation analyses also supported, see the [online supplemental material](#)), the critical asymmetry does not depend on perceptions of the overall moral character of the target soldiers.

Study 6

The final possible explanation we explored is that participants' harsher judgments of soldiers on the unjust side of a war may reflect an ingroup bias. People erect group boundaries on the basis of even quite minimal information and demonstrate preferences reflecting these boundaries (Tajfel, 1970). And a strong allegiance to one's own ingroup predicts greater endorsement of hostile action, including war, directed toward outgroup members (Cohen, Montoya, & Insko, 2006; Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006). In the context of our studies, it may be that when reading a description of a war, participants implicitly align themselves with the just side, subsequently treating soldiers on the just side as members of their own ingroup, and soldiers on the unjust side as members of an outgroup. Their moral judgments about these soldiers might then reflect these implicit alignments, such that they preferentially judge the actions of soldiers on their own (just) side (see also DeScioli & Kurzban, 2013). On this account, moral considerations regarding the justness of each side are relevant because they serve as a signal of one's own group membership, but the proximate driver of the asymmetry is ingroup favoritism.¹³

To investigate this possibility, we manipulated which side of the war participants were aligned with, by telling them explicitly that they were citizens of one of the warring countries, or instead, that they were citizens of a neutral third country. If the asymmetry depends on ingroup favoritism, then we would expect that it should be similar in size when participants are aligned with the just side, or an external country—in such cases, participants' default alignment with the just side is either reinforced or left intact. However, when participants' default alignment is overturned, and they are asked to imagine themselves as citizens of the unjust side, their default alignment with the just side is now in conflict with what they have been explicitly told. In this case, because the purported proximate cause of the asymmetry has been disrupted, participants' judgments can no longer be dictated by an allegiance to the just side, and so the asymmetry should be reduced or eliminated.

Table 4
Overview of the Design of Study 6

Condition	Participant alignment	Ceasefire violator (i.e., unjust side)
1. Aligned just	Dumolia	Borilia
2. Aligned unjust	Borilia	Borilia
3. Aligned external	External	Borilia
4. Aligned only	Borilia	Unspecified
5. Baseline	External	Unspecified

For this study, we described a new sort of war that originated from a long-lasting and hostile border dispute between two countries. There were five between-subjects conditions in the study, which resulted from manipulating both whether the war had a clearly just and unjust side (which we refer to as a “morally asymmetric war” for the purposes of this study) or not, as well as the participants' alignment with the countries in the war. These conditions are summarized in Table 4.

In the asymmetric war conditions, war broke out after one of the countries violated an existing ceasefire by bombing a hospital in its rival's territory. The country that violated the ceasefire was the unjust country (“Borilia”) and the country that had been attacked was the just country (“Dumolia”). Participants were instructed that they were members of either the just (Condition 1: aligned just) or the unjust (Condition 2: aligned unjust) country, or alternatively, a third, neutral country (Condition 3: aligned external) that was removed from the war. In the two remaining conditions, the reason for the violation of the ceasefire was not specified, and so the war did not have a clearly just or unjust side (it was “morally symmetric”). In these conditions, participants were either aligned with one of the warring countries (Condition 4: aligned only), or with a third, neutral country (Condition 5: baseline). Participants in all five conditions judged a soldier from both sides of the war, making side a within-subject factor (given that Studies 1 and 2 had shown that the effect of side is equally robust within-subjects as it is between-subjects).

Manipulating alignment in this design allows us to make the following critical tests. Comparing Conditions 1 (aligned just) and Condition 2 (aligned unjust) allows us to test the central question regarding the effect of alignment. If the difference between evaluations of the just and unjust soldiers is attenuated in Condition 2 relative to Condition 1, this would suggest that (implicit) alignment with the just side may be part of the explanation for the

¹³ In a related vein, participants may be implicitly or explicitly “pattern matching” the hypothetical scenario to real wars that they know about and aligning themselves with the country that best resembles the United States or its allies. The present study cannot disentangle these two possibilities. However, we have conducted a follow-up study to investigate this specific issue, and the results do not seem to support such pattern matching. When presented with a war scenario that (we thought) closely resembled a conflict the United States had been engaged in, a majority of subjects identified it as resembling a real-world conflict (165 out of a total *N* of 273). However, whether or not they did so did not predict their moral judgments of the defensibility of the soldiers' actions—the documented asymmetry was just as large for participants who recognized the war as resembling a real conflict as for those who did not (Watkins, Vosburg, & Goodwin, 2019). We thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this possibility.

asymmetry. A similar comparison can be made between Conditions 2 and 3 (aligned external) if the effect of side is smaller in Condition 2 than 3, this would similarly suggest that implicit alignment with the just side may be part of the explanation of the asymmetry. Finally, comparing Condition 1 (aligned just) with Condition 4 (aligned only), allows us to test what additional effect justice considerations have over and above the effect of alignment.

Method

Participants. Six hundred and three participants were recruited through AMT and were compensated for their participation (279 women, 317 men, seven other; $M_{\text{age}} = 36.66$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.24$). Ninety-three people answered at least one of the attention check questions incorrectly, leaving a total sample of 510 (see further details in the [online supplemental material](#)).

Design, materials, and procedure. In this study, participants first read a war scenario, modeled on current geopolitical events but using the fictional countries “Borilia” and “Dumolia.” The scenario described a longstanding border dispute, which was currently in a state of ceasefire, because of extensive negotiation by the international community. This description was designed to make the countries equivalent in moral terms before war subsequently broke out (neither side being just or unjust in this initial state). After reading the initial description of the countries, participants were asked to imagine themselves as a citizen either of Borilia, of Dumolia, or of a third country. In all cases, participants were told that although they remained a civilian throughout the war and were not directly involved, they followed the conflict in the news and were therefore aware of developments in the hostilities. At this point, participants were asked for an initial indication of their own alignment (referred to as prewar alignment): “Which of the two warring countries do you most identify with (i.e., feel a sense of connection or kinship with)?” on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 = *fully identify with Borilia* to 7 = *fully identify with Dumolia*. (Whether Borilia or Dumolia was presented on the left or the right side of the scale was randomly varied for each participant.)

Next, participants were told about a breach of the ceasefire, which led to renewed conflict. The breach was described either in neutral terms, without identifying a perpetrator (“the ceasefire is breached”), or as resulting from Borilia’s unjust actions: “Borilia violates the ceasefire by bombing a hospital in Dumolia.” Partic-

ipants in the three aligned conditions were then asked to indicate, on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *a great deal*, how they felt about the actions of their own country (anxious, proud, sad, angry, scared, happy, disgusted, ashamed, grateful), which served as an additional check on our alignment manipulation. The next question was the postmanipulation measure of alignment (postwar alignment). This was identical to the prewar question except with the phrase “In light of the information you just read” appended at the start.

Participants then made moral defensibility judgments about each country’s decision to enter the war (presented in a random order), followed by the primary outcome measure: moral defensibility judgments of a soldier’s act of shooting and killing an enemy soldier. These judgments were made about a soldier from Borilia, and a soldier from Dumolia, in a random order.

Finally, participants completed two attention checks (they were asked to indicate which country they were from, and which country violated the ceasefire), provided demographic information, and were debriefed and thanked.

Results

As expected, in the baseline condition (Condition 5) there was no effect of side on judgments of decisions to enter the war, whereas in the three “morally asymmetric” conditions (1–3) and the one “aligned only” condition (4) there was an effect of side. These results are summarized in [Table 5](#).

The manipulation of participants’ alignment was also successful, as indicated by responses to the prewar alignment measure. (All responses to this measure were recoded such that Borilia = lower numbers, see [Table 6](#) for descriptive statistics.) When participants were told they were from Dumolia (aligned just), they identified more with Dumolia; M difference from midpoint (4) = 1.99, 95% CI [1.76, 2.22]; $t(98) = 17.53$, $p < .001$, whereas when they were told they were from Borilia, they identified more with Borilia (aligned unjust: M difference = -1.89 , 95% CI [-2.13 , -1.65], $t(100) = -15.85$, $p < .001$; aligned only: M difference = -2.04 , 95% CI [-2.25 , -1.84]; $t(96) = -19.71$, $p < .001$). In both conditions in which participants were aligned with an external country, responses were no different from the midpoint; aligned external: M difference = -0.01 , 95% CI [-0.05 , 0.03], $t(105) = -0.45$, $p = .657$; baseline: M difference = -0.02 , 95% CI [-0.08 , 0.04]; $t(106) = -0.63$, $p = .530$.

Table 5
Descriptive Statistics for Moral Judgments About the Countries’ Decision to Enter the War Across the Different Conditions, Study 6

Condition	M (SD)		t	p	d^a
	Borilia	Dumolia			
1. Aligned just ($n = 99$)	1.84 (1.56)	5.69 (1.64)	-13.708	<.001	1.38
2. Aligned unjust ($n = 101$)	1.91 (1.31)	5.50 (1.67)	-14.924	<.001	1.49
3. Aligned external ($n = 106$)	1.79 (1.23)	5.65 (1.70)	-17.037	<.001	1.67
4. Aligned only ($n = 97$)	3.23 (1.52)	2.97 (1.42)	2.737	.007	0.28
5. Baseline ($n = 107$)	3.18 (1.75)	3.14 (1.74)	1.070	.287	0.11

Note. Higher numbers indicate greater moral defensibility (on a 7-point scale). In all asymmetric war conditions (i.e., Conditions 1–3), Borilia was the unjust violator of the ceasefire, and Dumolia was the just defending country, see [Table 4](#). In Condition 4, participants were aligned with Borilia.

^a Cohen’s d corrected for the correlation between the judgments ([Morris & DeShon, 2002](#)).

Table 6
Descriptive Statistics for Alignment Across Ratings the Different Conditions and Comparisons Between Prewar and Postwar Alignment, Study 6

Condition	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i> ^a
	Prewar	Postwar			
1. Aligned just (<i>n</i> = 99)	5.99 (1.13)	6.14 (1.29)	1.347	.181	0.14
2. Aligned unjust (<i>n</i> = 101)	2.11 (1.20)	3.76 (1.34)	13.806	<.001	1.38
3. Aligned external (<i>n</i> = 106)	3.99 (0.22)	5.40 (1.30)	11.006	<.001	1.32
4. Aligned only (<i>n</i> = 97)	1.96 (1.02)	2.43 (1.24)	4.929	<.001	0.50
5. Baseline (<i>n</i> = 107)	3.98 (0.31)	3.99 (0.17)	0.300	.765	0.03

Note. Responses were made on a 1–7 scale. Lower numbers indicate stronger identification with Borilia (the unjust country).

^a Cohen's *d* corrected for the correlation between the judgments (Morris & DeShon, 2002).

The postwar alignment scores revealed a slightly different picture. As Table 6 shows, once the nature of the war had been revealed, participants who were aligned with the just side (Condition 1) did not show any shift in their alignment judgments. However, for participants who were aligned with the unjust side (Condition 2), learning about their country's unjust actions shifted their judgments such that they were only marginally different from the scale midpoint; *M* difference = -0.24 , 95% CI [-0.50 , 0.03]; $t(100) = -1.78$, $p = .078$. Meanwhile, alignment judgments shifted in the direction of the just side for participants who were aligned with an external country (Condition 3); this is consistent with the possibility that in our previous studies, participants were implicitly aligning themselves with the just side. Alignment judgments did not shift at all when participants were aligned with an external country and the war did not involve a just and an unjust side (Condition 5; see Table 6 for test statistics). Curiously, when the war was morally symmetric and participants were aligned with one side (Condition 4), the resumption of hostilities shifted participants' identification toward the middle of the scale (away from their own country's end of the scale).

These results show that the alignment manipulation successfully influenced prewar alignment judgments. The postwar alignment judgments were more equivocal: When war resumed, participants who had previously identified with the unjust side no longer did so (Condition 2). However, notwithstanding these later identification judgments, there is still good evidence that participants felt impli-

cated in the side specified by the manipulation. As Table 7 shows, participants who were aligned with the unjust country (Condition 2) reported considerably greater negative moral emotions (anger, disgust, shame) about their own country than did participants aligned with the just country (Condition 1), or with one of the countries in the morally symmetric war (Condition 4).

They also reported significantly lower pride and gratitude, and higher sadness. These emotion reports indicate that, although participants on the unjust side may not have identified strongly with their country's war effort, they still felt themselves part of that country, and experienced emotional reactions that were consistent with that sense of belonging.

Descriptive statistics for the moral defensibility judgments are presented in Figure 5. In the aligned just condition (Condition 1), there was an effect of side, as expected, such that participants regarded the just soldier's actions as more defensible ($M = 5.18$, $SD = 1.53$) than the unjust soldier's actions, $M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.81$; *M* difference = 1.18 , 95% CI [0.77 , 1.60]; $t(98) = 5.662$, $p < .001$. There was a similar effect of side in the aligned external condition, Condition 3; just: $M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.69$; unjust: $M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.75$; Mean difference = 0.76 , 95% CI [0.48 , 1.03]; $t(105) = 5.397$, $p < .001$, which shows—consistent with our prior studies—an effect of moral considerations (i.e., the justness of each side's cause) in the absence of explicit alignment with one of the warring parties. The effect of side was also significant in the aligned unjust condition (Condition 2; just: $M =$

Table 7
Profiles of Feelings Across the Different Aligned Conditions (1–3), Study 6

Feeling	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)			<i>F</i> (2, 294)	<i>p</i>	η^2_p
	Aligned only (Condition 4)	Aligned unjust (Condition 2)	Aligned just (Condition 1)			
Anger	4.20 (1.89) _a	5.71 (1.56) _b	2.97 (1.97) _c	57.569	<.001	.28
Shame	3.57 (1.76) _a	5.83 (1.54) _b	2.17 (1.58) _c	129.397	<.001	.47
Disgust	3.85 (1.92) _a	5.69 (1.68) _b	2.69 (1.85) _c	69.647	<.001	.32
Fear	5.33 (1.72) _a	5.17 (1.78) _a	4.24 (2.10) _b	9.664	<.001	.06
Anxiety	5.63 (1.52) _a	5.32 (1.70) _a	4.44 (2.11) _b	11.542	<.001	.07
Pride	2.44 (1.63) _a	1.38 (0.89) _b	3.43 (1.82) _c	47.347	<.001	.24
Happiness	1.50 (1.02) _a	1.28 (0.74) _a	2.26 (1.63) _b	18.855	<.001	.11
Sadness	5.12 (1.64) _a	5.78 (1.42) _b	3.80 (2.17) _c	32.485	<.001	.18
Gratitude	1.94 (1.41) _a	1.35 (0.83) _b	2.99 (1.76) _c	36.062	<.001	.20

Note. Participants responded on a 1–7 point scale. Different subscripts in each row indicate significant differences, $p < .05$, Bonferroni corrected for multiple comparisons.

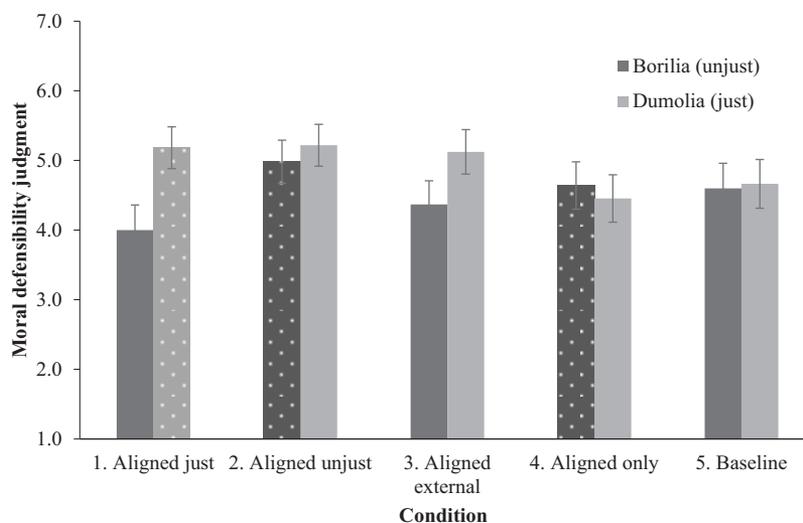


Figure 5. Moral defensibility judgments of the actions of Borilian (dark bars) and Dumolian (light bars) soldiers, organized by condition, Study 6. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals of the mean. In the three asymmetric war conditions (1–3), Borilia was always the country which violated the ceasefire; that is, Borilia was the unjust country. In the three conditions in which participants were aligned with one country or the other (1, 2, 4), the dotted bars indicate the country with which they were aligned. The effect of side was significant in all conditions except baseline; Dumolia: $M = 4.66$, $SD = 1.86$; Borilia: $M = 4.60$, $SD = 1.89$; M difference = 0.07, 95% CI [-0.07, 0.20]; $t(106) = 0.961$, $p = .339$.

5.22, $SD = 1.50$; unjust: $M = 4.98$, $SD = 1.55$; M difference = 0.24, 95% CI [0.03, 0.45]; $t(100) = 2.254$, $p = .026$). Critically, however, it was significantly attenuated in this condition relative to the effects in both Condition 1—interaction: $F(1, 198) = 16.495$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$ —and Condition 3—interaction: $F(1, 205) = 8.593$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. These interactions all indicate that implicit alignment with the just side may underpin the observed asymmetry to some degree—when participants were explicitly aligned with the unjust side, thereby reversing their default alignment, the asymmetry weakened, albeit not entirely.

We also compared the effects in Conditions 1 (aligned just) and 4 (aligned only), which allows an additional examination of the role of moral (i.e., justice) considerations, independent of the effect of alignment: Condition 1 features both alignment and moral considerations (one side was just, the other not), whereas Condition 4 features only alignment. The effect of side was larger in Condition 1 relative to Condition 4 (interaction: $F(1, 194) = 20.447$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$),¹⁴ thus offering a further demonstration that alignment cannot fully explain the asymmetry—moral considerations play a role in addition to alignment. This result complements the basic effect of side in Condition 3 (aligned external), when participants were aligned with a neutral third party. (See the [online supplemental material](#) for additional comparisons among conditions.)

Discussion

By independently manipulating both moral considerations (just vs. unjust sides) and participants' alignment with either side, Study 6 examined whether participants' implicit alignment contributes to the asymmetry that we have observed throughout the preceding studies. Consistent with prior studies, when the war involved only moral considerations (Condition 3; aligned external), participants

judged the actions of the soldier on the just side to be more morally defensible. As compared with previous studies, in this condition, participants were explicitly aligned with a neutral third party, thereby blocking implicit alignment with the just side as a possible contributing factor to the asymmetry. Participants similarly judged the soldier on the just side more favorably when they were explicitly aligned with that side (Condition 1). By contrast, when participants were explicitly aligned with the unjust side (Condition 2), the asymmetry was significantly attenuated (relative to both Conditions 1 and 3). This attenuation suggests that implicit alignment with the just side is responsible for part of the standard effect. However, even in the aligned unjust condition, participants judged the actions of the soldiers on the just side (their outgroup members) to be more morally defensible than those of soldiers on the unjust side (their ingroup members), showing that alignment alone does not fully explain the asymmetry.

Supplemental Study 3. In sum, we have found evidence for two factors that seem independently to contribute to the asymmetry—the presumption that soldiers endorse their own side's cause for war, and the implicit tendency for participants to align themselves with the just side and judge its soldiers as part of their ingroup. When each of these factors is experimentally overturned, the asymmetry is significantly attenuated. In a final study, we

¹⁴ To calculate this interaction, we needed to directly compare the two ingroup conditions against one another. This required switching the alignment coding in Condition 4 because participants were aligned with Dumolia (rather than Borilia) in this condition. The simple effect of side was significant in Condition 4; outgroup: $M = 4.45$, $SD = 1.73$; ingroup: $M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.66$; M difference = -0.19, 95% CI [-0.31, -0.06]; $t(96) = 2.880$, $p = .005$.

asked whether the asymmetry could be completely eliminated with concurrent, independent manipulations of both of these factors.

We independently manipulated participants' alignment, and soldiers' identification with their own side's cause for war (between-subjects), alongside a within-subjects manipulation of side. The results of this study ($N = 415$) showed that the asymmetry persisted even when both of these attenuating factors were combined. When participants were aligned with the unjust side of a war (as in the present study), and the soldiers on both sides of the war rejected their countries' war efforts, the asymmetry was significantly smaller, defending: $M = 4.74$, $SD = 1.68$; invading: $M = 4.27$, $SD = 1.80$; $t(86) = -4.979$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.36$,¹⁵ than in a control condition in which participants were aligned with a neutral third party, and no information was provided about the soldiers' level of endorsement; defending: $M = 5.41$, $SD = 1.64$; invading: $M = 4.34$, $SD = 2.03$; $t(63) = -4.977$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.64$; interaction between side and condition (the two conditions just described), $F(1, 139) = 5.461$, $p = .021$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. However, even in this study the asymmetry persisted in all conditions, suggesting that part of the effect remains unaccounted for. (Full details of this study are provided in the [online supplemental material](#) and at osf.io/zwcmv.)

General Discussion

The language of just war theory is routinely employed by politicians (Carter, 2003; Obama, 2009), journalists (Mackey, 2009), and veterans (Brock & Lettini, 2012) in discussing the morality of war. This theory makes an important distinction between judgments about *going to war* (resort to war), and about the *conduct of war*; a distinction referred to as the *independence thesis*. As a corollary, it maintains that soldiers on either side of a war, even a morally asymmetric war, are moral equals (the principle of combatant equality) and should be judged only by their conduct in war; not by the cause for which they fight. Significant philosophical debate surrounds this element of just war theory (e.g., McMahan, 2004, 2009; Walzer, 2006). Our goal was to approach the question descriptively, by investigating whether ordinary individuals make judgments that are consistent with the principle of combatant equality, a question which has received little empirical scrutiny. Our studies clearly show that American MTurk workers do not generally make moral judgments that align with the principle of combatant equality. Rather, their judgments of the defensibility of an individual soldier's actions are heavily influenced by the justness of the cause for which the soldier is fighting. Soldiers on the just and the unjust side of a hypothetical war are therefore judged asymmetrically.

This asymmetry in judgments was remarkably robust. It occurred whether soldiers were acting under orders or on their own initiative (Study 3); whether their actions causally contributed to their side's war effort or not (Study 4); whether soldiers identified with their country's cause for war or not (Studies 4 and [Supplemental Study 2](#)); whether the soldier had generally good or bad character (Study 5); and whether the participants were part of the same national group as the soldier or not (Study 6 and [Supplemental Study 3](#)). It also occurred reliably in both joint and separate evaluation conditions (Studies 1 and 2), suggesting that participants normatively endorsed asymmetric judgments.

The robustness of the effect across these various manipulations provides information about its underlying cause. The effect was only

marginally, and inconsistently, attenuated when soldiers acted on orders as opposed to their own initiative (Study 3, see also the [online supplemental material](#)). This suggests that the effect is not primarily explained by the presumption that soldiers' actions reflect their own independent volition, and a corresponding neglect of the factors that situationally constrain soldiers in war—even when these constraining factors are made entirely obvious, the effect persisted. The fact that the effect was not attenuated even when soldiers' actions did not causally contribute to war outcomes (Study 4) suggests that the effect is not explained by the differential outcomes of soldiers' actions. And the fact that the effect was not attenuated when the soldiers' overall character was stipulated (Study 5) suggests that the effect is not explained by inferences of general character from the target soldier's side. However, the fact that the effect was significantly attenuated when soldiers were described as not identifying with their side's cause for war (Studies 4 and [Supplemental Study 2](#), see also the [online supplemental material](#)), and when participants were explicitly aligned with the unjust side (Study 6 and [Supplemental Study 3](#)), suggests that these two factors comprise a meaningful part of its explanation. In other words, people tend to presume that soldiers endorse their own side's cause for war, and this then influences their moral judgments of soldiers' actions. Similarly, people tend implicitly to align themselves with the just side of a war, and this sense of sharing (moral) group membership with soldiers on the just side also influences their judgments of individual soldiers in the war. These two factors may not explain the entire asymmetry, but together, they can explain a substantial part of it.

There were two other notable boundary conditions on the asymmetry. First, when soldiers performed extremely good actions (e.g., helping enemy civilians, sacrificing their own life to save their comrades) or extremely bad actions (e.g., killing enemy civilians, defiling enemy corpses), the asymmetry was no longer observed, though it did emerge reliably for actions that were short of these extremities (Study 3). This may be partially reassuring for those who have been concerned that a rejection of the independence thesis would lead to soldiers on the just side having *carte blanche*—that is, moral liberty to take any actions whatsoever, on the grounds that their ends justify their means (Benbaji et al., 2015; McMahan, 2009). Ordinary people, at least, do not see it that way.

The second boundary condition is that when the arguments of traditional just war theory—specifically, the independence thesis and the principle of combatant equality—were presented in the abstract, 60% of participants agreed with them (Study 2). This proportion was considerably larger than that observed when people made concrete judgments of soldiers on either side of an unjust war in the joint evaluation condition of the same study (34% or 39% depending on whether the question was asked categorically or continuously). In other words, people endorsed the principle of combatant equality abstractly but did not make judgments that aligned with it. This discrepancy was surprising, but it has a potential post hoc explanation. Research suggests that abstraction (or higher levels of construal) makes moral judgments more principled and value-based (Eyal, Liberman, & Trope, 2008; Eyal, Sagristano, Trope, et al., 2009), which may be why the principle of combatant equality was more convincing when considered in the abstract. However, because our

¹⁵ Cohen's d was corrected for the correlation between judgments, as all participants judged both soldiers (Morris & DeShon, 2002).

principal focus was on concrete judgments, we did not pursue this interesting discrepancy further.

Although our main interest was in judgments of the moral defensibility of soldiers' actions, the asymmetry also reliably emerged in evaluations of the soldiers' character—both their core moral goodness (e.g., integrity and kindness), and their strength of character (e.g., dedication and competence; see Piazza et al., 2014, for the distinction between core goodness traits and value commitment traits). However, there was a greater asymmetry in evaluations of the soldiers' core goodness traits as compared with their strength of character traits. In fact, when shared variance with core goodness was partialled out, the effect of side on strength of character judgments was negligible (and not significant). Strength of character traits were also less closely tied to judgments of the soldiers' actions than were moral goodness traits. This dissociation might result from there being a closer conceptual link between core moral goodness traits and the features that make a war just or unjust, leading to these traits being more susceptible to the asymmetry.

Overall, the nine studies reported here provide a comprehensive investigation of a central tenet of just war theory, the principle of combatant equality. These studies show that this principle is not widely followed by lay individuals, and they identify two independent contributing reasons for this. Because this principle forms the cornerstone of traditional just war theory, the present studies have important implications for the theory, as well as for moral and social psychology.

Implications for Just War Theory

The present findings have important implications for just war theorists insofar as they want their theories to connect with human moral psychology. Indeed, one of the goals of both traditional and revisionist just war theory is actively to shape public opinion about war. For example, Walzer (2006) believes that traditional just war theory “worked . . . in helping Americans understand what was wrong in Vietnam” (p. i). In counterpoint, Leveringhaus (2012) believes that revisionist just war theory, “can be used to instill a sense of individual responsibility and conscience in citizens and members of the armed forces” (p. 17), and McMahan (2012) writes that, “What revisionists hope is that their work can be a source of guidance in establishing new international institutions that will eventually make it possible to reform the law of armed conflict” (para. 32). The present results establish that revisionist just war theory corresponds more closely to the current state of lay opinion within the United States (at least among the MTurk subset of the population) concerning the principle of combatant equality than does traditional just war theory.¹⁶ Interestingly, this does not seem to result from ordinary people's appreciation and endorsement of the philosophical bedrock on which revisionist theorizing is based. Indeed, neither of the two psychological factors that seem to give rise to the asymmetry—people's belief that soldiers identify with their own side's cause, and people's implicit alignment with the just side—are emphasized within revisionist just war theory itself. However, the fact that people's judgments end up aligning with revisionist theory, regardless, is instructive. It suggests that traditional just war theorists face an uphill battle in convincing lay individuals to judge soldiers on either side of an unjust war as moral equals (though we acknowledge that this idea is seen as more acceptable in the abstract, see Study 2).

Implications for Moral and Social Psychology

Earlier research in social psychology has provided a nuanced and complex picture of the factors that increase or decrease support for war, when one's own group is involved as a perpetrator or a victim (Bar-Tal, 2007; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000; Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, & Nadler, 2012). A core idea of this research is that knowing that one's own country is engaged in unjust actions in war (e.g., killing civilians) can generate an experience of “intragroup” cognitive dissonance (e.g., why is my country, which is good, engaging in harmful violence?) which needs to be resolved somehow (see Aquino, Reed, Thau, & Freeman, 2007; Glasford, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009, Study 1; Fiske & Rai, 2014; Leidner & Castano, 2012). Individuals who tend to glorify their own country react to the intragroup dissonance evoked by their own country's unjust wars by de-emphasizing the need for justice to be delivered to the perpetrators, a response that is mediated by dehumanizing and diminishing the suffering of outgroup victims (Leidner, Castano, Zaiser, & Giner-Sorolla, 2010). Our work branches out from these investigations by directly manipulating the overall justness or unjustness of the parties to war, thereby showing the profound effect this has on moral judgments of soldiers' actions. Although our studies are not the first to investigate these factors (see Benbaji et al., 2015), they are the first to demonstrate comprehensively the effects of justness in shaping moral judgments of the conduct of war by third-party judges, and the first to provide an explanation for this effect. Further, while earlier work primarily focuses on judgments of support for or (opposition to) one's own country going to war (i.e., judgments of resort to war, see Watkins, 2019, for a review), we examined judgments of a wide range of actions undertaken during war, conducted by soldiers on both sides of the conflict.

Though we have not pursued the downstream consequences of these judgments, several can be hypothesized. Overall moral judgments of the justness of one's own country's war efforts likely influence political attitudes and behavior regarding that war, which may be expressed in rallies, demonstrations, or in the voting booth. Our results go further than that, however, because they also show how judgments of individual soldiers, and not the war itself, are influenced by the justness of the cause for which soldiers fight (see also Watkins & Laham, 2018b). It is conceivable that such judgments could have a substantial effect on the way soldiers returning home from war are received—whether they are accepted and valorized, or alternatively, rejected and denigrated. Such judgments may also affect people's support for policies that aid soldiers' transition back into civilian life, which in turn may have an effect on the overall adjustment and well-being of soldiers themselves. A soldier who returns from a war that is widely perceived to be unjust may, in the worst cases, be criticized, shunned, or otherwise rejected by his or her local community. Such findings, compounded with the sense of betrayal that soldiers may also feel toward the governments that sent them to fight an unjust war in the first place (see, e.g., Glenton, 2016), may make the transition back

¹⁶ Our studies do not show that ordinary individuals can be categorized as “revisionists” as opposed to “traditionalists” in general terms, because the debate between these theories extends beyond the principle of combatant equality. Instead, these studies are relevant specifically to the principle of combatant equality.

to ordinary civilian life ever more difficult, thereby exacerbating soldiers' susceptibility to mental health problems (Brock & Lettini, 2012; Sherman, 2015). Future research might investigate how social variables pertaining to returning soldiers' public image intersect with their postwar mental health.

Limitations and Future Directions

A strength of the present studies is their inclusion of a range of different kinds of modern war, and similarly, their inclusion of a wide variety of possible actions taken by soldiers. Notwithstanding this, our studies are limited in their focus on hypothetical and *conventional* wars: Military contests between nation states fought with conventional national armies. Our studies exclude consideration of civil wars, cold wars, and other forms of unconventional, asymmetric war. The war on terror, for example, does not fit neatly into the framework provided by just war theory because of its diffuse geography, because of the difficulty of identifying which actions comprise this war, and because of the difficulty of precisely identifying its combatants (e.g., Clark & Raustiala, 2007, argue that terrorists are not combatants, but instead, criminals).¹⁷ An important avenue for extending the present findings, then, would be to other kinds of war, as well as to scenarios involving real countries and conflicts they have engaged in.

A further issue worth considering concerns soldiers' knowledge about their country's justness or unjustness in going to war. Perhaps one reason the asymmetry emerged in our studies is because our vignettes all implied (by default) that the soldiers did have such knowledge. But what might have happened if we had instead instructed participants that the soldiers on the ground had no knowledge of the justness of their own side's cause? Is it possible that the asymmetry in our studies could have been eliminated with such an instruction?¹⁸

This is indeed possible, although our studies suggest that it is unlikely. In Study 4 and [Supplemental Study 2](#), we found that when a soldier believed his country's cause was unjust, and rejected it, judgments were more symmetrical (judgments of the soldier on the unjust side were more lenient). Yet the asymmetry still persisted to a significant degree under these conditions—soldiers on the just side who rejected their own side's cause for war were still judged significantly more favorably than soldiers on the unjust side who rejected their side's cause. Although knowing and rejecting one's own side's cause for war is not the same as not knowing it in the first place, rejection does seem to be a more extreme mental state manipulation than mere ignorance because it indicates considerably greater psychological "distance" from one's own side than does ignorance. This in turn would seem to imply that the asymmetry is also likely to persist if we had used the "milder" mental state manipulation of instructing subjects that the soldiers were merely ignorant of their own side's cause. Of course, we cannot be sure about this, and have no data that speaks to this hypothesis directly;¹⁹ it is certainly interesting enough to warrant further research.

Our studies isolate a challenge to Walzer's independence thesis flowing from the cause for war, to judgments of actions: They show how judgments of soldiers' actions are dependent on judgments of the overall cause they serve. However, a distinct challenge to the independence thesis may arise in the opposite direction, if for instance, judgments of the cause for which soldiers fight

are influenced by judgments of specific actions those soldiers carry out.²⁰ This is particularly relevant in cases where soldiers perform especially heinous or meritorious actions, similar to the ones we investigated in Study 3. That study was not capable of addressing this possibility, because judgments of the resort to war were solicited before participants were exposed to information about the specific actions that the soldiers had carried out. However, future research could usefully explore whether the independence thesis might be violated in this "reverse" direction as well.

It would also be useful to explore whether the present findings extend beyond the context of war entirely. Construed in the abstract, the dynamic of war—two (or more) parties locked in an ongoing competitive exchange—is replicated across a variety of other societal contexts, including legal disputes, marketplace competitions, and even sporting competitions. The same question that we ask here could similarly be asked in other contexts, for example, are the low-level employees of an organization that is generally seen as nefarious also judged harshly for the ordinary pursuit of their work activities? On the one hand, based on the present findings we may predict that they would be (particularly given that the employees are likely to be seen as endorsing the aims of the civilian organization they have joined). On the other hand, social context matters for moral judgment (Carnes, Lickel, & Janoff-Bulman, 2015; Simpson, Laham, & Fiske, 2016), and there may be unique aspects of military contexts that produce the judgments we have observed here (see, e.g., Fiske & Rai, 2014; Watkins, 2016, 2019; Watkins & Laham, 2018a). The answer to this question awaits empirical scrutiny.

Our studies are also limited by their exclusive focus on AMT workers within the United States. Though this population is a reliable resource for behavioral studies, and is at least as representative of the U.S. population as are traditional undergraduate

¹⁷ However, Walzer (2006) writes that although "asymmetric warfare has its own set of moral difficulties and immoral cruelties that require specific, detailed consideration" (p. 191), the same moral rules—that is, the principles concerning decisions to go to war and how a war is fought, outlined by just war theory—can be applied to armies as well as insurgents or terrorists, and he demonstrated this in Walzer (2008).

¹⁸ We thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this possibility.

¹⁹ One possible reason why this ignorance hypothesis might be true is as follows. People might see ignorance as more exonerating than rejection if they infer that a soldier on the unjust side would not have continued to fight in the war had he possessed knowledge of his own side's unjustness. In our studies, of course, the soldier who rejected his own side's cause did continue to fight notwithstanding his belief (knowledge) of its unjustness. This therefore might be one reason why information about ignorance could be more powerfully attenuating than information about rejection or disavowal. This would indeed be interesting, if it occurred, but to our minds it introduces a wholly new set of considerations beyond those studied in the present project. First, it introduces hypothetical, counterfactual reasoning about what would have happened had the soldiers' state of knowledge been different. Second, it would likely lead to qualitatively different inferences across the two sides, that is, people might infer that the soldier on the unjust side would have withdrawn with better knowledge but would be unlikely to infer the same consequence for the soldier on the just side (inferring instead that he would have continued to fight). Third, it also means that the "soldiers" in question would be mentally reclassified as a potential "conscientious objectors." Because our project was focused on soldiers who do indeed fight and kill, and who do so without mistake, we judged this potential follow-up as beyond the scope of the present investigation.

²⁰ We thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this possibility and for suggesting ways to test it.

subject pools (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010), this limitation means that our findings cannot yet be generalized more broadly.²¹

Conclusion

The terrible reality of war is a crucible. Soldiers often describe their experiences in war as the most intense of their life, filled with a passion and engagement that is not replicable in peace time (Hedges, 2002; Junger, 2016). Perhaps one reason for this is that the life and death nature of war saturates it with moral elements, yielding a chronically elevated sense of meaning and purpose (Rovenpor et al., 2019). Yet, this moral dimension of war is clearly not confined to the psychology of combatants alone, as war is also viewed in starkly moral terms by complete outsiders. In the present work, we have tackled but one of the moral elements of war—how the justness of a war influences ordinary people's judgments of its combatants—and have demonstrated and (partially) explained a robust asymmetry in such judgments. We hope that this work serves as an invitation for moral psychologists to explore this rich territory further.

Context of Research

The ideas for the present project emerged from Hanne M. Watkins's visit to Geoffrey P. Goodwin's lab, supported by an Endeavor Fellowship. They extended upon the ideas contained in Hanne M. Watkins's Ph.D. thesis. We are currently following up the findings of the present article by investigating the principle of combatant equality as it is applied in moral judgments of soldiers fighting in real wars (e.g., the Vietnam War, World War II).

²¹ Another sociocultural factor that might matter is military experience. In a short MTurk study, we found that out of 134 participants, five reported that they personally had military experience (3.7%, 95% CI [2.88, 4.52]), whereas 113 reported that they did not. The remaining 16 participants did not respond or gave an uninterpretable answer. Our largest study included 720 participants, so if this same proportion holds, this study would have approximately 27 veterans, which is too small a number to conduct any additional analyses. Full details of this study are provided in the online supplemental material.

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