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## THE INEVITABILITY OF WAR

**Mortimer Adler**

Part 1 of 2

**H**OW CAN we *know* that world peace is possible, that war is wholly avoidable? There always have been wars. How can we know that wars are not inevitable?

It is certainly true that during the last twenty-five hundred years men have lived with the belief that war is inevitable, that another war will occur in a short time. On point of fact, this belief has been completely verified. No decade has passed without one or more wars somewhere in the world. In the more civilized parts of the world, the average family has not survived three generations without some of its members being directly engaged in war, or at least suffering from the social and economic convulsions which follow in its wake.

But do these facts justify the inference that war is inevitable? “What always has been will be” is not always true. A valid inference here depends on knowledge of causes. If the reason why something has always happened is a cause in the very nature of things, then it will continue to happen as long as its cause remains operative, and that will be until the underlying nature is itself destroyed.

If the cause can be controlled or eradicated, the event which once *seemed* inevitable may be avoided. But even when something is avoidable in the very nature of the case, it still may not be avoided. That will depend on us—on our learning the causes to control, and on our making an adequate effort to control them.

The history of medicine records the shifting of many diseases from the incurable column to the list of the curable and the cured. With gains in knowledge and advances in therapy, we have learned, not only how to prevent and cure such ills as typhoid fever and diphtheria, but, what is more important, we have learned that they were never incurable in the first place. The discovery of our error in thinking the *merely uncured* to be incurable gives us confidence that other ailments still uncured will turn out to be curable as medical science progresses.

We have come to suspect that all diseases are curable, and that it is up to us to find out how to cure the ones which still prove fatal. But we also distinguish between the ills of human flesh and its mortality. We do not expect to cure death—by heart failure or other lethal degenerations of the vital organs. Heart failure is not a sickness; it is simply dying.

*Is war like disease, or is it like death?* Is it intrinsically curable, though still uncured? Are we in danger of making the same sort of error about it that men once made about typhoid and some still do about cancer?

## 2

A problem in the field of social phenomena provides us with a closer parallel to war and peace.

We now know that chattel slavery can be abolished. For the most part, it has been. But suppose we were living in the eighteenth century and had to judge whether chattel slavery would always exist. To say that it could be done away with would be to fly in the face of overwhelming evidence that slavery has always existed.

In China and India, Egypt and Persia, Greece and Rome, in the Middle Ages and even in modern times, human beings were bought and sold. The forms of slavery vary with the civilizations and the centuries. The condition of the slave becomes somewhat ameliorated by legal safeguards which limit the abuse he may suffer at the capricious will of his master. But throughout all these variations the bondsman remains a chattel. He does not own his own life or the fruits of his labor. He is not his own, but another man's. With few more rights than the domesticated animal, he lacks the rights proper to a human person.

In the eighteenth century, men could not help being impressed by the fact that slavery had always been a social institution. Reading history as if it revealed a necessity, they argued that so enduring an institution must have an ineradicable cause.

Even wise men, men who understood and practiced justice, argued that some men are by nature slaves and fit only to be used as instruments. The Roman jurists, the Christian theologians, and the American constitutionalists did not find the proposition "all men are born free and equal" incompatible with the existence of chattel slavery. To their minds, it was an institution inseparable from the fabric of human society.

As late as the middle of the eighteenth century, men who had struggled for their own liberties were not shocked by slave-trading. The *New York Gazette* for September 4, 1738, carried an advertisement offering for sale, "Englishmen, Cheshire cheese, Negro men, a Negro girl, and a few Welshmen." Its duplicate could be found in the colonial papers of Philadelphia or Boston, as well as in the South. Not until 1799 did the efforts of the, Quaker Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves succeed in passing a bill which began the gradual emancipation of human chattels in New York.

At the end of the eighteenth century, and in the first half of the nineteenth, all the abolitionist movements flew in the face of history. Unable to deny that chattel slavery had always existed, they could only argue that its existence was never due to an ineradicable cause—a difference at birth and in nature between some men and others.

It was not easy for them to say what we proclaim with confidence: that no man is by nature a slave; that neither social organization nor economic welfare demands this unjust institution. Our ances-

tors who thought otherwise had cause to be deceived. It was difficult for them to see that the slavish appearance of some men resulted from the way in which they had been treated, not from the nature with which they were born.

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Chattel slavery is, however, only one form of social inequality and economic exploitation. There is grim irony in the fact that the Common Council of New York in the 1730's "designated a popular meeting point, Wall Street, as the place where Negroes and Indians could be bought, sold or hired."

Waiving the question whether every sort of economic exploitation can be remedied, let us ask whether all social inequalities can be eliminated. The answer to that question is no.

That all men are born equal is only half the truth. The other half is that individuals, equal in the endowments *specific* to human nature, vary widely in the degree of their talents and virtues. The historic Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen acknowledged this inequality. While denying that such inequality could justify the deprivation of a single political right or exclusion from citizenship, it recognized that society and government require organization, and that organization requires a diversity of unequal functions.

All men should be called to citizenship, but not all should be regarded as equally competent for all political offices. In political life, as in the arts, men of superior skill should be chosen- to perform the more difficult tasks, even though that may involve the direction of some by others for the sake of a good common to them both. But the architect who directs the artisan does not *enslave* him.

There is, in short, a form of social inequality which is functional. It occurs wherever the organization of men in any common work involves a division of labor, and where different tasks require different skills. Such social inequality is unavoidable *in the very nature of the case*.

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*Is war like chattel slavery, or is it like the functional inequality of superior and inferior engaged in a common work? Is it a curable social ill, or does it belong to human life because of what man is and what human society must be?*

The answer to these questions depends on the view we take of the great injustices which have stained human history. Some of these have been rectified. There is good ground for the faith that all can be remedied—ameliorated, if not abolished. War belongs with these if it is essentially abnormal, a violation rather than a fulfillment of human nature.

*We cannot rightly think that war is normal merely because it has always plagued the social life of man.*

## THE ABNORMALITY OF WAR

THE PERSON who thinks we cannot *know* whether war is avoidable may argue that before the end of the eighteenth century men did not know chattel slavery could be abolished. Before that time most men had not even dreamed of the possibility.

This mode of argument runs itself into the ground. It amounts to saying that, until a basic social reform is accomplished, it must appear to be impossible. It commits the error of confusing history with nature, and makes knowledge that something is *possible* entirely *ex post facto*.

If this were so, then the abolitionists of the nineteenth century were trying to do what they must have admitted was impossible. They were, however, eminently practical men aiming at an objective they conceived to be quite practicable, not only because it seemed to them intrinsically possible, but more than that—attainable in their own day.

According to the kind of argument which relies solely on history, no one will ever *know* that perpetual peace is possible until after it exists.

To consider the matter properly, we must go beyond history to the political nature of man. Does the political nature of man make peace the normal condition, war the abnormal? At once the man who relies on history will say that nothing can be regarded as abnormal which has everywhere and always prevailed.

Without appealing to the facts of human nature, his error cannot be shown. Yet even so far as history goes, he has looked at only half the picture.

There are two great historical facts, not one. The first is that there always have been wars. The second is that there always has been peace.

*There always have been wars.* Up to the present, men living in distinct social groups have always had to resort to fighting to settle their differences. There always have been wars *between* organized groups of men, whether the level of social organization is that of tribe or village, city-state, empire, or nation.

The word “war” should not be used to cover every sort of violent conflict between men. That would blur everything. Criminals, individually or in gangs, do resort to violence, but every sort of violence is not war. In its commonest usage, the word “war” refers to violent conflict between separate communities. The social organization which characterizes the communities reflects itself in the socially organized character of the violent conflict we call “war.”

*There always has been peace.* Up to the present, men living within each socially organized group have been at peace with each other. That peace has not, of course, been perfect or uninterrupted. It has usually been attenuated by civil disorder; but so long as the political community itself endures, the *civil* peace it creates is not entirely destroyed.

Strictly, we should use the word “peace” in the plural, just as we speak of “wars.” Disregarding euphony, we should say that there have always been as many “peaces” as there have been relatively stable social organizations. Each peace, existing among the members of a given community, has been local.

The fact that separate communities have been destroyed by conquest does not mean that the men who survived ceased to live at peace with one another. By force or consent, they became members of another community, and continued to enjoy the peace of community life to some degree, even though they may have been willing to sacrifice that peace to regain their former independence.

Neither the wars nor the peaces which the world has seen have been continuous. Wars between communities have been interrupted, for longer and shorter periods, by truces—by the cessation of hostilities which, we sometimes call “international peace.”

The civil peace of most historic communities has frequently been sundered by revolution or civil strife of some sort.

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Despite these obvious facts, the man who thinks future wars are unavoidable may say that he sees no reason to alter his view. The only difference between the future and the past will be world-wide wars in place of local wars; but then the truces will also become world-wide in extent.

The man who still thinks that a lasting world-wide peace is impossible will say that the ambivalent facts of history do not prove him wrong. He is right in one sense. By themselves, the facts of history do not constitute the proof. They must be interpreted to discover the critical bearing they have on the issue. They must be made to show us something about man.

The cardinal fact that men can and do live at peace with one another signifies that wars do not flow from the very nature of man. If by his nature each man could live in no other way than at war with his fellows, then local peace would never have existed anywhere in the world.

The fact's are otherwise. We find men living at peace everywhere in the world and at all times. Even in a world at war, men live in peace with the members of their own community. Paradoxical though it may seem at first, civil peace, like political unity, frequently is intensified within a community which is at war beyond its borders. The other face of the paradox is that the inhabitants of a country at war cannot enjoy the "pursuits of peace" which make peace more desirable than war.

War as we know it—war between communities—would not be possible without the existence of communities, and except in the context of the various local peaces which these communities establish.

The state of war which Thomas Hobbes describes as the "natural" condition of man has never existed on earth, *so far as individual men are concerned*. There has never been "the war of all against all" because men are not by nature solitary beasts. They have always lived together in societies. Hence the war of *each* against *every other* has never occurred among men, as it does occur in the jungle among the solitary beasts of prey. When Hobbes wrote of

the natural state of man as a state of war, he knowingly invented an *hypothesis contrary to fact*.

4

The proof is not yet completed. The ambivalent of history, it can be argued, seem to show that war is a normal condition for men, as much as peace. Why are we not obligated to admit that both war and peace flow equally from human nature?

The answer is that men live at peace *only under certain conditions*, namely, the conditions provided by an organized society. Now, if it can be shown, as I think it can, that these social conditions respond to a natural human need, then it will be seen that peace is indispensable to the normal development of human life. If we see why a man cannot live humanly except he live at peace with his fellows, we shall understand why human nature requires peace. We must also see why the opposite is not true—why a man can live humanly without being in a state of war with some of his fellow men.\*

\* The members of the American Psychological Association were recently polled on the question, “Do you as a psychologist hold that there are present in human nature ineradicable instinctive factors that make war between nations inevitable?” Seventy per cent of the members answered as follows: No, 346; Yes, 10; Unclassified, 32.

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