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## HOW TO THINK ABOUT WAR AND PEACE

Mortimer J. Adler

[ Part I of 3 ]

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### ***THE INEVITABILITY OF WAR***

**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.

Is war like disease, or is it like death? Is it intrinsically curable, though still uncured?

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*.

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.

Still the question arises: why, then, have there always been wars, if war is not required by the nature of man?

There is absolutely nothing in the nature of man repugnant to the existence of a world community, as there is something in the nature of man repugnant to the existence of no communities at all. The nature of man makes world peace possible, for the same reason that it makes the war of each man against every other impossible. The reason is man's need for society and, in order to preserve the society, for peace.

The fact that wars have always existed between communities signifies only man's past failure to eradicate the cause of war- a cause which lies outside his nature, a cause which must be found in the character of his social institutions. These are ultimately the work of his intelligence and will. They have been made by man. They can be changed by man.

Just as the existence of slavery implies the existence of free men, the existence of war implies the existence of peace. We cannot

even conceive of a society in which all men are slaves. But, Hitler to the contrary, we know that it is in no way impossible for all men to be their own masters. Nothing in the nature of man prevents a social organization in which all men are free.

The historical fact which enabled some men to understand the possibility of abolishing chattel slavery was the fact that freedom had always coexisted with slavery, even as peace has always coexisted with war. That helped them to see that slavery resulted from alterable social institutions, not from the essence of human nature which man cannot change at will.

Freedom and peace correspond to the deepest aspiration human nature. That man is by nature rational makes slavery repugnant, even as the fact that man is by nature political makes war abnormal.

Other animals are gregarious, but only man is by nature political.

Some of the gregarious species live in a relatively stable family groups; some move in herds; some, as the social insects, belong to elaborate organizations a hierarchy of functions and division of labor. But, in every case the form of social life is instinctively determined. Generation after generation, the social structure of the beehive or the any mound remains the same. As long as a given species endures, its social pattern, like its modes of reproduction or nutrition, does not vary from species to species, not within a single species.

Though man is naturally gregarious, instinct does not determine the human forms of social organization. They exhibit a tremendous range of variation. Wherever one finds a beehive, one expects to find the same social arrangements. Such uniformity cannot be found in human communities. Furthermore, even within the same community of men, the social structure undergoes transformation in the course of generations. Man is the only historical animal, as well as the only political animal.

Like some other gregarious animals, man needs the society of his kind, not merely for pleasure but for survival. This basic biological need can be regarded as an instinctive drive toward association. Because they are not self-sufficing, men are instinctively impelled to live together. But instinct goes no further than this fundamental impulse.

Human intelligence devises the forms of association and conceives the institutions through which the social impulse of man is realized in a wide variety of organizations. Hence to say that man is by nature a political animal means two things: first, that man cannot live except socially; second, that the forms of his social life result from the exercise of his intelligence and freedom. They are not predetermined to any particular form.

There is no conflict between the modern theory of civil society as formed by a social contract and the ancient view that man is by nature a political animal.

The great political thinkers of modern times did not suppose that the human race could survive a single generation if all men tried to lead solitary lives. When they talked about man living in a “state of nature,” which he bonded to live with his fellows in a “state of civil society,” they had no historical event or process in mind. They simply meant that man’s natural need for social life must be supplemented by the activity of his reason in devising, and the activity of his will in instituting, the political community.

The word “contract” signifies a voluntary or free engagement. Men do not have to live in civil societies. They are not instinctively determined to do so. They do so only when their reason tells them it is the best thing for them to do; and then they do so freely—by conventions which they voluntarily institute or accept.

In short, civil status, or membership in a political community, is both natural and non-natural to man. It is non-natural only in the sense that it is non-instinctive; or, to put it positively, in the sense that it is conventional—like any human artifice, the result of intelligence and volition. It is natural in the sense that it is natural for man (who does not act according to definite instinctive patterns) to exercise his reason and will to devise those institutions which most fully satisfy his human needs, the demands of his nature.

Men form political communities in order to have peace, in order to live without fighting and violence and to enjoy the positive benefits which peace confers. Peace, which is identical with the order of civil life, represents the normal condition toward which the nature of man aspires. War, identical with the absence of civil order, violates and frustrates human nature. That is why war is abnormal.

The abnormality of war is further evidenced by its effect on the highest forms of political life.

Men establish themselves in a civil society in order to live well. The conditions of its origin thus show the state or political community to be a means, not an end. Its purpose is to serve the happiness of individual persons. When the state subordinates the good of individual lives to its own welfare, it violates its own reason for being.

Such violence is done by the totalitarian states, whose exponents declare the good of the state to be an ultimate end, and who practice this false religion of "statism" by sacrificing men to the idol.

Democracy is the only completely just form of government, for it is the only form of government under which all men receive what are their due- rights and privileges of equal political status. If the political community originates to help men live well, the history of political life does not reach the natural term of its development until democracies come into being. Only then does a society exist in which all men, not must some, can live well.

In short, it is not society under any form of government, but only constitutional democracy, which adequately fulfills the needs of man's political nature. Anything less necessarily frustrates and degrades, even when it does not enslave, the many who, while members of the population, cannot call themselves and each other "citizen."

Now, it is a significant fact that the enterprise of war is more injurious to the political processes of a democracy than to the governmental procedures of the less advanced forms of civil society. Despotic government can undertake war without departing from its ordinary pattern. But a constitutional democracy requires all sorts of emergency measures in order to engage efficiently in war making. The worst forms of government- the least just and the least mature- are those most inclined toward war and the best prepared for its trials.

This confirms the abnormality of war is in no way lessened by the distinction between good and bad wars, just and unjust wars. All wars violate the nature of man and defeat his normal aspiration for the goods of social life- the goods which reflect the beneficence of peace.

## **WHAT PEACE IS**

“War consisteth not in battle only, or the act of fighting,” wrote Hobbes, “but in the known disposition thereto, during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary. All other time is Peace.”

The peace which Hobbes has in mind is civil peace, not peace between independent nations. It is the “king’s peace,” against which criminals offend when they commit “a breach of the peace.” It is the sort of peace which can exist within a country while it is waging war on foreign fields.

The conception of war as not limited to battle, and of peace as not being merely the absence of fighting, applies to the external relationships of a state, as well as to its internal condition.

To know the cause of peace, we must first know what peace is. Let me appeal to a writer who thought he could define peace. In “The City of God”, Saint Augustine said:

“The peace of the body is ordered temperature of parts...The peace of body and soul is ordered life and health of animate being....The peace of man is ordered concord. The peace of the household is the ordered concord of commanding and obeying among those living together. The peace of the city is the ordered concord of commanding and obeying among citizens.....The peace of all things is the tranquility of order. Order is the disposition of equal and unequal things attributing to each its place.”

In this statement, several points should be observed. In the first place, Saint Augustine is considering both the peace of an individual living thing and the peace of a community which includes a multitude of distinct individuals. The latter is peace in the social sense, whereas the former is peace in an individual sense—the inward peace of the heart, the peace between man and God. These two should never be confused. Social peace is primarily an affair of political institutions, justice, and law; individual peace, primarily a moral matter, an affair of virtue and charity.

In the second place, any condition of peace involves these elements: a multitude of things; their concord with one another; and an order among them which establishes this concord. In the social sphere, peace consists in a multitude of persons living together in concord and enjoying the tranquility of order.

In the third place, order is the central term. On the one hand, it establishes concord in a multitude; on the other, it confers tranquility upon their living together. And when the multitude comprises of human beings who can live together by rules of their own devising, rather than by instinct, order results from two factors: from “commanding and obeying” and from “the disposition of equal and unequal things attributing to each its place.”

Order results from the reign of law or from the operations of governments, according to which men are related as rulers and ruled. Order in a multitude also results from the organization of that multitude, in such wise that each member occupies a place according to his equality or inequality with every other member.

The very word “community,” which has the word “unity” at its root, signifies that here is a unity which has come together. The significance of “community” also involves the notion of many persons having something in common. When men associate for a common purpose and share in common benefits derived from their association, they form a community-whether this be a social club or an industrial cooperation, a university or a political party, a family or a state.

However a community is formed, whatever be its size, its purpose, or the special characteristics of its personnel, social peace will be found wherever we find men living or working together in a community. The most important thing for us to see is that the peace of a family does not differ essentially from the peace of a village, nor does the peace of a small country, restricted in area, sparse in population, differ essentially from the peace of the largest state which has ever existed.

Peace does not consist in the total absence of fighting or quarreling, that it does not require all the members of the household to agree about everything.

We could define the political community by specifying the political common good. But it is easier to separate it from all the others by its inclusiveness. By its “inclusiveness” or “comprehensiveness”. I do not mean to imply that the political community should arrogate to itself every social function. That is the horror of totalitarianism. A well-ordered political community not only permits but also encourages the existence of subordinate associations to perform a wide variety of functions-economic, educational, or recreational.



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## EDITOR'S NOTE

This series on War and Peace was excerpted from Dr. Adler's book *How to Think About War and Peace* by Robert Sutherland, Senior Fellow of the Center.

For those of you who are interested in this subject and that book, please also read Issue # 146.

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