

PRAGMATISM AND WAR

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War is the armed conflict of nations or states with one another. Although violence has accompanied the efforts needed for war, without rationale and a measure of central control, aggression rarely succeeds.

It is attractive to suppose that the love of fighting is bred into the human psyche. This idea gains plausibility from our insatiable desire for watching sports. But our devotion to contests is not an embrace of war, or else the human race would have long become extinct. Individuals can get involved in wars as leaders or soldiers, yet it is not an individual activity. No one can start a private war just as no one can secure the benefits of private sunsets. The moral landscape around war would be a lot simpler if we could let the martial few do the fighting while we got on with the ordinary tasks of life. That, presumably, was the advantage of the Medieval custom of jousting by individuals to keep the casualties of war to a minimum.

The moment mediation enters the scene, moral relations change: everyone becomes a soldier or is compelled in some other way to contribute to the war effort. Imagine how much death and destruction could have been avoided if we had refused to participate even in any one of the Twentieth Century wars. But this is idle speculation distanced from the social, economic and especially the power realities of the day.

The purpose of wars ranges from the humiliation to the annihilation of one of the combatant states.

Even though we speak loosely of a war on cancer and of waging war on inequality, the core activity in war is to defeat an armed enemy. What counts as victory can differ from case to case: the Allied Forces in the Second World War demanded unconditional surrender while Israel was satisfied with the right to exist. The same variability shows itself as states reach for the moral high ground in the justification offered for the war: some present ancient grievances while others claim to restore the moral balance of the universe. The speed with which nations

resort to force is indicative of *their* moral development, so we must be careful to assess their claims rather than to accept them at face value.

One can reasonably ask what motivates people to risk their comfortable lives in the search for military glory. The obvious and obviously wrong answer is that glory is attractive and their lives are not. Human motivation tends to be complicated and the early stages of conflict, with their cheap victories, can readily create wrong expectations. Contempt for the aggressors can lead to miscalculations and when they realize that they face not a battle but a sustained war, they tend to back off, declaring victory. The recent Russian invasion of Ukraine appears to be of this sort.

Much war revolves around territorial disputes; others seek justification in the name of liberating kinfolk from alien influence. The most vicious fighting occurs when a religious or ideological issue is at stake; absolute truth requires absolute sacrifice. What starts as wanton cruelty soon becomes the systematic terrorization of civilians, attempting to break the spirit of the nation. Prior to the war the parties agree on what must not be done: cheerful lists of basic decency circulate and are endorsed by the parties who will soon disregard them. Once the war begins, it is a free-for-all and the threat to haul offenders to international criminal courts is an empty promise.

This is where pragmatism comes in. There is a sense in which American thought is idealistic to a fault and that is often attributed to a simple and beautiful pacifism. And indeed there are Americans who think the world is new and all we have to do to participate in this renewal is our share of peaceful growth. The tendency is to offer our best and leave the rest to some cosmic principle or God. Royce, among others, is quite explicit on this point, and William James would like to be if his reality sense allowed it.

Would it not be wonderful for human beings all over the globe to be at peace with one another? The ideal is mighty and may be unattainable; the world is full of nasty people who would be delighted to take advantage of others. Fortunately, there is an element of realism in the conduct of United States foreign policy. It may have land-

ed us in too many wars, but it has also protected us at crucial junctures.

I offer my stoic pragmatism as a shorthand for how to think about important individual and social decisions. The key is to love life and believe that it can deliver more than it currently does. Projects and purposes occupy the minds of pragmatists and this puts them in touch with the future on a continuing basis. As a unique combination of optimistic predictions and cold realism, the contact must be exceptionally difficult to sustain. Yet that is the only way we have of gaining access to belligerent temperaments. The stress is on intelligent changes that, with time, become habits and constitute a better world.

That construction is the ultimate promise of pragmatism. The road to it is strewn with obstacles, but that is to be expected of a philosophy that aims to transform the world. In a small but real way, it has already changed Europe, enabling visitors to travel without a mound of documents and seeking what is of benefit to all.

Stoic pragmatism is a set of principles appropriate for organizing many lives. A tacit pragmatism underlies much of the history of the human race. Mere survival as a goal readily, albeit perhaps only temporarily, converts into the desire for leisure and enjoyment. We imagine primitive warriors and early practitioners of agriculture as wanting to improve their condition in the world. They use whatever tools are available and, from time to time, make small improvements in the arts of war. There may be no conscious effort at general improvement but, as a minimum, failure tends to elicit repeated efforts with better instruments.

Similarly, there are traces of stoic endurance in the early history of humankind. I have in mind not the professional stoics such as Marcus Aurelius, but the nameless multitudes who long suffer in silence and then die. The amount of pain people of the Middle Ages endured is incalculable and even today cancer patients require special fortitude. This does not mean that prior generations abounded in stoic pragmatists or that people then subscribed to the

theory. It does, however, suggest that elements of the theory enjoy support from direct experience.

The most difficult problem for the stoic pragmatist is the decision when to be pragmatic and work for improvement and when to be stoical and simply endure what fate casts our way. A relatively advanced form of cancer might serve as an example. One person, with a lot to live for may well decide to tough it out, paying a high price for a statistically low chance of recovery. Another person, tired of life, may feel that a few extra days are enough of misery. There is no way to condemn either person; motivation for continued life is an individual matter and cannot be commanded.

This does not mean that all decisions are equally good or else there would never be regrets. Unfortunately, as things stand in the world, few choices go unaccompanied by pain. Indefinitely many factors influence the decision to fight for life. One may be habit: sickly people find it natural to be exposed to the full armamentarium of modern medicine. Another consideration may be the opinions of loved ones. Satisfaction with life may add support to either choice. In the end, the decision is likely to come down to the agent's purposes.

A convenient way of sorting purposes is by size. A student who enrolls in college aiming to be a doctor has a huge task taking courses, volunteering and shadowing physicians. At the other extreme, I have to decide on the next word in this sentence. Neither purpose is simple, but the complexity of the former far outstrips that of the latter. Many purposes are time-spanning, requiring stretches of time for actualization.

In an ordered life—and few lives fail to be ordered in this sense—temporally immediate purposes receive attention first and more remote and distant actions are constituted out of them. The suicide must first find his pills and, before then, his way home. Life consists of such nested activities evoked and controlled by nested purposes. The chain of responses affords many points of intervention. The suicide may recall that although his

love rejected him, his editor did not and the prospective physician can withdraw from the program before failing Organic Chemistry.

When direct intervention is difficult or impossible, hope often takes its place. Here again, we deal with distinctions of size from the first-time buyer of a lottery ticket to the cancer patient who waits for the nurse with the syringe. Hopes tend not to be nested; when they create opportunities for intervention, they approximate purposes or incipient actions. In trying to understand decision making, it is essential to affirm that human beings are not automata and often though not always act on the basis of considerations.

Let us take the case of a cancer patient, 69 years old. She was suffering from a form of lymphoma, Stage 4, which was threatening her life. Her physicians agreed that without treatment she had only a month or two to live. Aggressive intervention may bring good results at the price of considerable pain and illness. Nothing could be promised, but prior applications of chemotherapy had extended lifespan by years although it did not successfully cure the disease.

Being a stoic pragmatist, she inquired what good her consenting to treatment would create. Simply being alive is not benefit enough; some purposes must be formed and fulfilled. Her longstanding and continuously enriching relationship with her husband may have been enough to opt for life, but in addition her daughter was scheduled

to be married in four months. Moreover, she had reason to hope that upon multiple applications of chemotherapy things would go back to normal.

By comparison with the proactive pragmatic side, stoic endurance offered little. Giving up without a battle seemed shamefully hasty---as if one were afraid of pain. The only thing we must beware of is dishonor and that can be stopped if the treatment becomes intolerable. The patient chose treatment and enjoyed eleven years of nested purposes.

What holds as method on the individual plane, holds also on the level of social life. The theory that fulfillment consists of active membership in a political community has not received the criticism it deserves. The sources of satisfaction suggested—even encouraged—in our world called capitalist are far greater than a strongman can accommodate. Freedom goes hand-in-hand with the freedom to fail, and it is easy to deny its legitimacy on the basis of this cost. Americans tend to want to fight only when nearly all else fails. At the end of hostilities, they hasten back to their private affairs. Their system favors a stoic pragmatist approach with an account of plans and purposes that would be created and others that would be disrupted if these were the only values. Unfortunately, they are not. We are constantly dragged into confrontation with dictators and petty tyrants, and we have not yet learned how to make short shrift of them.