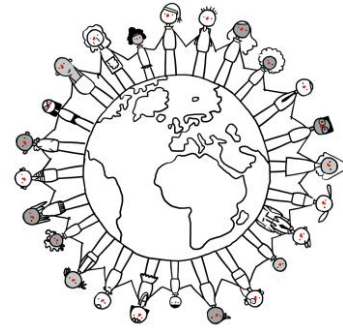# Humanist perspective: War and peace

Humanists try to use reason, experience, evidence, and respect for the dignity of others when thinking about ethical questions. When deciding what is the right thing to do, they consider the particular situation and the potential consequences. They try to promote happiness and fulfilment in this life because they believe it is the only one we know we have. This makes many humanists think very carefully before supporting any war, both because of the loss of life involved and because of the potential impact on the survivors.

EVIDENCE

There is, however, no universally agreed humanist perspective on war. Many think we should always seek non-violent solutions first and will work to promote peace. Some are pacifists and believe violence should always be avoided. Peaceful solutions are not always easy to find or to enforce, as the history of the United Nations (UN) demonstrates, but humanists strongly support the work of the UN aimed at resolving conflicts between nations peacefully. Humanists helped to set up the UN, and humanists were the first directors of several UN agencies. Some humanists, however, believe that resorting to violence in self-defence or for altruistic reasons (to protect the lives and the rights of others) can sometimes be justified on a national level, just as it can on an individual level. Overall, many humanists believe we need to look at all the available **evidence** and carefully consider the consequences before any decision to go to war.

The horrors of war (for example, the enormous destruction and loss of life in the First World War, or the genocide against the Jewish people in the Second World War) make many humanists, as well as many other people, question the likelihood of the existence of a benevolent and omnipotent deity (see 'Humanist perspective: The problem of evil' for more information).

Causes of war

Wars throughout history have often been influenced by a tribal instinct, a defensive desire to protect our territory or tribe, or an aggressive desire to gain an advantage over a different group. Many humanists believe we can use our natural capacities of **reason** and **empathy** to overcome some of our less desirable natural instincts. Many wars have also been fought over the centuries over religious differences, and organised religions have occasionally supported or even encouraged wars. Many humanists do not believe that religion ever provides an appropriate motive for war. It is important to note that many wars apparently motivated by religion are also motivated by other factors. However, any 'holy war' fought purely for the achievement of some religious goal, or motivated by some notion of a spiritual reward for those who take part, is likely to be disapproved of by humanists.

Some of the most destructive regimes in the past century have been atheist (e.g. Stalinism, Mao's Communism, the Khmer Rouge). However, they were also largely authoritarian, totalitarian, and built on a system of unquestioned doctrines. They were very different from the liberal democracies that many humanists support and that have a very good record for not starting wars.

Humanist perspective: 'Just war'

> 'The early Christians refused to do military service, and some modern Christians, mindful of the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" and of Jesus' injunction to "turn the other cheek"… have also been pacifists. However, when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire, the Church changed its position and came to accept that there could be "just" wars. In this, it was drawing on the writings of earlier Greek philosophers and Roman lawyers. The underlying moral principle was not that it is always wrong to kill, but that it is always wrong to kill the innocent. This is generally taken to mean that it may be acceptable to kill the soldiers of an enemy state if it has committed an injustice, such as invading the territory of another state. A war to overturn such an injustice could be regarded as a "just war". But the principle also implies that it can never be right intentionally to kill civilians, because as non-combatants, they are "innocent".'
>
> **Richard Norman, philosopher and patron of the British Humanist Association**

This is the heart of what has come to be known as **'just war' theory**. It has outgrown its Greek, Roman, and Christian origins. It is the dominant way of thinking about war in the modern world and has become part of the modern system of international law. It provides a way of thinking about the rights and wrongs of war, and the principles that nation states should respect. Today, it is employed in such a way as to prevent wars rather than justify them. By showing war is wrong except in extremely limited circumstances, it aims to motivate nations to find other ways of resolving conflicts.

However, 'just war' theory raises at least two difficult issues. Firstly, many people would agree there is something wrong with the deliberate targeting of civilians in war. This particularly includes the use of weapons of mass destruction, such as nuclear bombs and chemical and biological weapons. However, virtually all modern warfare involves weaponry and tactics that lead to the death of innocent civilians. Are all wars today therefore unjustifiable?

Secondly, and perhaps more fundamentally, can we really make the distinction between those who are 'innocent' and those who are not? Most soldiers have not chosen to go to war; they are forced to fight. Aren't their deaths just as terrible as those of civilians (some of whom may have supported the war)?

If, then, all wars involve killing the innocent, aren't we back with the impossibility of justifying war at all? Shouldn't we all be pacifists? It is difficult for many humanists to lay down an absolute principle on this. A religious believer can say that, if we are commanded by our faith never to kill, we simply have to obey that command, whatever the consequences. Humanists can't ignore the **consequences**. They have to accept that, however terrible war may be, it is at least possible that a refusal to go to war may sometimes be worse. For many humanists, the Second World War might be a case in point. It led to huge destruction and millions of deaths, but if Nazism had not been resisted the outcome might have been even more terrible. Humanists would like to see a world without war, where all people can live in peace with one another. However, for some, the ultimate goal of peace can't be achieved without the immediate necessity for conflict. War can, on some occasions, represent human beings' ability to act communally in the interests of all.

All too often wars achieve nothing except terrible suffering, leaving a legacy of bitterness that sows the seeds for future wars. Most humanists are likely to say that, because we should value every human life as something unique and precious, we should always look sceptically at the reasons governments provide for inflicting death and destruction on other people, and do what we can to encourage a peaceful solution. But most humanists would also say that we have to look hard at each individual case, for occasionally war might turn out to be the lesser evil.

# Humanist perspective: War and peace

Weapons of mass destruction

There is no strict humanist perspective on nuclear weapons. Some see them as an unacceptable **threat** to humanity; others as a useful **deterrent**. Some may believe the destruction and loss of civilian life they cause is unjustifiable. Others may adopt a utilitarian approach, deciding that their use may be justified if it would ultimately save more lives by finally ending a war (this was one of the arguments used to justify the bombing of Japanese cities at the end of the Second World War). Either way, many humanists would consider the importance of the **evidence** when deciding on such a matter.

The unnecessary suffering caused by chemical weapons and the indiscriminate threat they pose to civilians make many humanists feel their use cannot be justified. However, some might suggest that many conventional weapons are just as bad, and some people argue that the opposition to chemical weapons is partly motivated by the desires of those states who already hold a vast superiority in conventional weapons. However, even if this were the case, it still would not necessarily justify the use of chemical weapons.

Peace and pacifism

Many humanists have been involved in working for peace. Between the two world wars, humanists were active in the League of Nations. After the Second World War, humanists helped to set up the **UN**, including Eleanor Roosevelt and John Peters Humphrey, who led the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; Dr George Brock Chisholm, the founding Director-General of the World Health Organization; Lord John Boyd Orr, the founding Director-General of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization; and Sir Julian Huxley, the founding Director-General of UNESCO.

Many humanists today support the UN's work to find peaceful solutions to international disagreements, believing that peace is essential if we are to uphold justice and human rights, and ensure people's personal freedoms. Many support the charitable work of organisations working to deal with the aftermath of war, including those providing support for the victims and those working towards reconciliation between the conflicting parties.
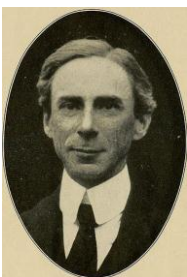
Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) was a philosopher who opposed war on the grounds that it was contrary to the interests of civilisation, and therefore immoral. He was a conscientious objector during the First World War, for which he was imprisoned. The rise of Nazism in Germany, however, led him to state that, although war was always a great evil, in some circumstances it might be the lesser of two evils. In 1958, he became the first president of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

Eleanor Roosevelt (1884–1962) was First Lady of the United States (1933–1945) and served as chair of the UN Commission on Human Rights, overseeing the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which aimed to 'promote the development of friendly relations between nations' and promote 'freedom, justice, and peace in the world'.

'It isn't enough to talk about peace. One must believe in it. And it isn't enough to believe in it. One must work at it.'
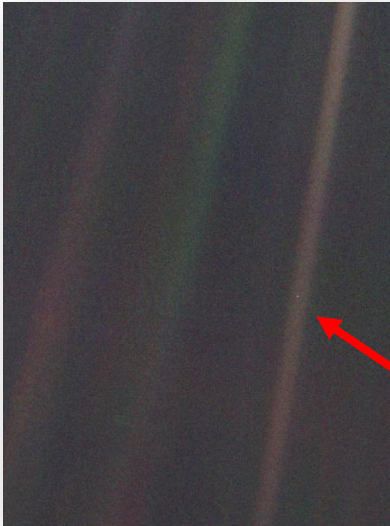
The Pale Blue Dot

The **Pale Blue Dot** is a photograph of Earth taken on 14 February 1990 by the Voyager 1 space probe from a distance of 6 billion kilometres, at the request of the astronomer **Carl Sagan** (1934–1996). Our planet appears among bands of sunlight scattered by the camera's optics. In it, our world is seen as tiny against the vastness of space.

Earth

'Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there – on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

'The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot.

'Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.

'The Earth is the only world known so far to harbor life. There is nowhere else, at least in the near future, to which our species could migrate. Visit, yes. Settle, not yet. Like it or not, for the moment the Earth is where we make our stand.

'It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known.'

Carl Sagan, humanist and astronomer

Questions for discussion:

1) How many wars in the 20th and 21st centuries involved religious differences?
2) How many examples can you find of wars begun by liberal democracies?
3) What can peace-keeping organisations such as the UN do to prevent war?
4) What actions should we take about wars in faraway places? What responsibilities do we have? (For example, should we send troops to keep the peace? Should we send help and weapons to one side? Should we send aid to the civilian population? Should we take in refugees from war-torn countries?)
5) Is violence ever acceptable? Is war ever acceptable? Is pacifism always the best policy?
6) Should we have nuclear/chemical weapons?
7) Should conscientious objection be allowed?
8) Should humanists be represented (as religious groups are) at the national Remembrance Day celebration?
9) How are you deciding your answers to these questions? What principles and arguments influence your answers?
10) How is the humanist view on this issue similar to that of other worldviews you have come across? How is it different?

Further resources:

- 'Humanist perspective: The problem of evil'
- Defence Humanists: defencehumanists.org.uk/
- A video featuring Carl Sagan's Pale Blue Dot: www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cgVkOo2wXw
- Humanist perspectives on war, a video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=-dWXlEZ_A_k
- A video of humanist philosopher AC Grayling answering questions on war: http://yalebooks.co.uk/display.asp?K=9780300175349
- Video of AC Grayling's talk to Defence Humanists: Can a humanist make sense of war?: www.youtube.com/watch?v=AfIFIvAssgs
- A statement by former president of the International Humanist and Ethical Union on Humanism and peace: http://iheu.org/humanism-and-peace/
- Humanists working for a better world: humanism.org.uk/humanism/the-humanist-tradition/humanists-working-for-a-better-world/
- David Pollack, 'Just War – A Humanist Critique': http://www.thinkingabouthumanism.org/humanism/just-war-a-humanist-critique/
- A website guide to the ethics of war: www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/war/
- Daily news on wars around the world: www.warsintheworld.com