How to Win the War on War?

The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus once declared that "war is the father of all things". What could this hermetic statement mean? Is war not the harbinger of death and the despoiler of all that we cherish? Be it between nations, colleagues or spouses, war, conflict and discord disturb the peace, divide our peers and cause our projects to miscarry. The thought that belligerence could be a womb for anything remains a deeply counterintuitive, if not perverse, idea.

We live in an age in which concord and consensus are almost unconditionally valued. In the labyrinth of intersecting and opposed cultural identities that constitute our emerging global society, it is no wonder that we are left groping after some common thread that can hold us together. And yet it feels as though we are condemned to a fate even worse than that of Tantalus, whose wine and grapes merely receded as he reached – the harder we grasp for a shared vision of "humanity", the more efficiently we realise the inverse of our goal. Isis and Al-Qaeda, for example, are just two of the many monsters spawned by the recent civilising efforts of the West. Are we fated to war, not just in spite of, but even thanks to our best efforts at prevention? This need not necessarily be the case, and Heraclitus' inspired call for a reappraisal of conflict may (ironically, it might seem) give us the very tools we need to combat such destructive strife.

In trying to examine the essence of conflict, thinkers throughout the history of philosophy, from Aristotle to Heidegger (and beyond), have repeatedly returned to Heraclitus. After all, how is it that both the natural and specifically human world, appear, upon closer inspection, to be constituted through various species of discord. This can be observed economically in the marketplace, athletically in the stadium, biologically in natural selection or physically in the opposed forces unifying atoms or solar systems. Even devastating military conflicts give birth to new nations and leaps in science and engineering. Taken too far, our desire for peace would undoubtedly become a Midas touch threatening our very existence. But can we distinguish between good and bad forms of conflict? Banish the latter and enjoy the former? To be sure, the desirable and undesirable effects of conflict are in many ways inextricably interwoven, and we cannot simply siphon off the best; but perhaps, as I will now argue, we might just be able to transmute some of the destructive manifestations of discord into more constructive conflictual practices.

The idea of affirming conflict and disagreement within social and political practice is a well-established one with its own field of political theory termed "agonism". The etymological root of this appellation is the Greek term "agon", meaning "contest", a term to which we shall return in a moment. The adherents of this school approvingly underscore the way in which modern liberal democracy is founded upon perpetual disagreement and debate. Their gripe, however, is that this process of contestation is often led by the doctrinaire hope of a final, rational agreement regarding how we ought to govern ourselves. Were this achieved, they say, politics would be reduced to a process of mere administration, as we would be left with only the task of applying the laws and conceptions of "justice" upon which we would all now be agreed. Apart from criticising the dystopian and apolitical nature of this vision, the agonistic democrats further contend that even in the act striving for this ideal we are prone to exclude minorities and those who do not fit our ideals of rationality, when it is to precisely these people that such democratic institutions should rather be giving continuous voice.

While this is all well and good, it presupposes that we are already enjoying some form of democratic relation to one another. It is not so helpful, however, when the task is that of dealing with intractable conflicts, where there is no

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overarching group identity or effective framework within which deliberative exchange can take place. But it is these very situations, which usually characterise the entrenched division of parties at war with one another, that lie at the heart of our current problem. It is for this reason that we should invoke the thought of the historian Jacob Burckhardt and the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, both of whom were interested in just these forms of deadlock.

This pair of thinkers, colleagues at the University of Basel in the latter half of the 19th Century, both made detailed studies of the role of "agon" played in ancient Greece. Both were fascinated by and sought to explain the staggering cultural achievements of this ancient culture. Even now we can only marvel at the quality and quantity of poetry, dramaturgy, sculpture, philosophy and juridical and political theory that was produced by so few people during the 6th Century B.C.E. alone. Burckhardt, dubbed this the "agonal age" – an age in which the principle of contest was not only institutionalised in competitive athletic games and artistic festivals, but also came to permeate Greek culture and practice as a whole. As each contestant strove to outdo his opponent, they were pressed into a personal struggle for excellence and self-perfection. According to Burckhardt, it was an almost crippling state of constant envy that was the emotional mainspring driving this culture of competition. But crucially, as city-states came together, and their populations mingled as they competed and spectated, enmity between these ordinarily hostile tribes was assuaged and war foreclosed, at least temporarily. In this way, the cult of the agon not only promoted the self-perfection of individuals, but inhibited war and thereby enabled a unified Hellenistic identity to emerge.

Nietzsche, the self-styled "philosopher with a hammer" declared that the "present-day European requires not merely war but the greatest and most terrible wars". As such, he may not seem like the obvious choice when looking for thinkers able to help us deal with the issue of violent conflict. Notwithstanding, as is (somewhat frustratingly) typical of Nietzsche, we also find him lambasting the practice of war and the rabid Prussian militarism that was so widespread in his day. War squanders the lives of talented young men, and, he continues, often threatens the fruition of culture and civilization. Indeed, in the face of such dangers, it is unsurprising that we find Nietzsche incorporating and developing Burckhardt's analysis. Nietzsche writes that the Greeks had two Eris goddesses, that is, two goddesses of strife. One of these was considered evil and wicked, and goaded men to murderous feuding; the other, however, impelled men to work and strive for excellence. Where the former was loathed by the Greeks, the latter was praised as a source of cultivation. Nietzsche stresses that the progression of the Greeks from a group of primitive factious tribes, oppressed under the heavy yoke of the evil Eris, into a nation of agonistic rivals was only possible because they *affirmed* conflict. They discovered that it was the desire for contest, combat and the pleasure of victory that was being expressed in war, not a desire for war *per* se. Thus, these needs could be isolated from the harmful effects of war and given a safe outlet in the practice of the agon.

In addition to this affirmative gambit, Nietzsche repeatedly emphasises another condition as vital, one that we would perhaps not expect: namely, *equality*. As is well known, the doctrine of the equality of man, especially as promulgated by socialists and Christians, is anathema to him. Life, as far as he is concerned, is marked by growth, consumption, difference, hierarchy and exploitation, and this goes for humans as much as it goes for other living things. Should a weaker entity stand in our way, Nietzsche thinks that if we are not simply repelled, we are bound to destroy or dominate that entity. It is only when two entities perceive one another as roughly equal – i.e. neither thinks it can destroy or exploit the other without thereby destroying itself or suffering at best a Pyrric victory – that they will enter into a state of co-operative tension. Far from the idea of pregiven universal equality to which Nietzsche was so vehemently opposed, these are localised instances, where two or more parties weigh one another up and decide that a policy of eradication or exploitation would be less prudent than cooperation. Only then can they compete on a par and mutually keep one another in check. This, for Nietzsche is not just a precondition of the agon, but also represents the origin of justice as a contract between roughly equal individuals (or nations) enabling their cooperation.

Famously, many of these theses were perniciously bastardised by the Nazi party in their effort to justify both the Holocaust and their aggressive foreign policy. But laying this loathsome and spurious aspect of his reception aside, we should seriously consider the extent to which there is truth to be found in his words. Is it not this very Nietzschean logic and perception of the world that still underpins both deterrence theory and disarmament programmes alike? To discourage the desire for domination and expansion ever present in others, a nation must be perceived by those others as if not stronger, then of at least equal strength. Again, I am not trying to defend this strategy, but simply to point out that it still forms a very fundamental aspect of our psychology, and that this is particularly visible where there

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is no effective, overarching law, such as is often the case between nation-states. But even at a very individual level, we have to ask ourselves whether or not we can productively, or even sincerely, compete with someone we don't consider an equal?

Naturally, we may not we agree with Nietzsche's diagnosis of life as domination (many don't), or the exceptional conditions under which he thinks potentially destructive energies might be given a socially beneficial expression. Even if we do agree, this only further problematizes the issue of genuinely incorporating minorities into democratic processes, and it doesn't offer a clear blueprint for how we should deal with guerrilla wars and hornet nests such as Al-Qaeda or Isis (I suspect that inviting them to a gymnastic contest would unlikely bear the desired results). What we must concede, however, is that in his call for a *transformation* of conflict – not first and foremost into peace, but rather productive contest – he offers even those working with a more liberal ethical framework, something novel and worth considering.

The counter-ideal against which Nietzsche formulates these arguments, is principally that of Christianity, whose followers he disparagingly characterises as longing for an eternal peace, "a Sabbath of Sabbaths" and a conclusion to struggle *tout court*. As we have seen, conflict is a fundamental principle of life, and therefore to extinguish it would be to negate life itself. It was a deep desire to counteract life-denial such as this that motivated Nietzsche's philosophy, which in many ways can be read as an attempt to resuscitate a humankind that he believed to have been left mediocre, weak and ignoble after two thousand years of oppression at the hands of Christian idealism. Nonetheless, I want to close by contending that we would also be wise to apply the above reflections to the current debate regarding the status of war in the contemporary world.

The current polarity defining this debate is perhaps exemplified in the recent public confrontation of Steven Pinker and John Gray. In his best-seller *The Better Angels of our Nature*, Steven Pinker argues that humans living today, in contrast to their historical counterparts, enjoy an existence in which violence and war play an at most negligible part. And it gets better: they are continuing to retreat. As causes of this "progress", he cites (among other things) the spread of democratic forms of governance, trade, communication, and, most importantly, the ever increasing hegemony of reason. Pinker, though he certainly sees humans as psychologically inclined towards violence, believes that such inclinations are fighting a losing battle against the contrary tendency we have for reasoned, pacifistic co-operation. To be sure, as rational, communicatory animals, he implies that we are neurologically wired in such a way as to almost guarantee the victory of pacifism in this struggle. He goes so far as to describe humans as on an "escalator of reason" – such shopping mall imagery fitting well with the wider timbre of his book. From the other corner, John Gray takes a staunchly anti-Enlightenment line, arguing that in reality, "Amid the general drift, cycles can be discerned: peace and freedom alternate with war and tyranny, eras of increasing wealth with periods of economic collapse." We are fated, Gray ominously warns us, to regress back into the horrors of mass war, and to interpret this brief respite as evidence of some linear progress would be myopic, wishful thinking; but to attribute it to our own rational agency, blind hubris. Where Pinker is unashamedly Whiggish, John Gray is openly pessimistic: even this so-called respite is not all it seems according to Gray – mass war has merely mutated into novel and more insidious forms: secret renditions, state oppression, mass starvations and proxy wars, to name but a few.

We are faced with a dichotomy: either we agree that we are effectively free of war, and guaranteed to suffer its burden even less as time rolls on, or we hold ourselves to be condemned to it, with naught to be done. But these are both paralysing positions with respect to any transformative project we might desire to undertake with respect to violent conflict. While Pinker's analysis is largely descriptive – i.e. he merely presents us with the facts as he sees them – its self-congratulatory tone breeds a disarming sense of complacency. On the other hand, Gray's gloomy pessimism thoroughly undermines our sense of agency; whether we can act freely or are pieces of naturally determined clockwork, the effect of Gray's article is unequivocally de-energising. But further, in these discussions, the value of conflict is framed as purely negative, and even where Gray convincingly illustrates how destructive conflict has taken new but no less maleficent forms, he fails to remark how its protean nature means that it might take equally constructive shapes. My intention, however, is not to defend the claim that either of these two thinkers lack nuance or insight, or that there isn't a wealth of research examining just this problem of how we might modulate conflict. To do so would certainly be mistaken. What concerns me is how natural the terms of their recent opposition can strike us – and in response to this, have tried to de-naturalise this polarisation of the discussion; that is, to show

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how it presents us with a false dichotomy. Instead of taking sides in this manner then, I suggest that we continue the search for galvanising, alternative approaches to the question of how we ought to think about conflict in both our personal and collective lives.

About the author:

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