

## On Morality and War

Thanks everyone for coming out on this bracing afternoon. And a big thanks to the team who organised it all – the soup cooks, bread makers, musicians, sound guys and so on!

I hope you enjoy yourself and find some good company and good conversation.

My team wants me to talk about “morality” because I am always banging on about its absence from the “experts” dialogue, analysis, conversation, what have you in relation to vital issues of war and peace.

My name is David. I am a co convenor of one of the local antiwar community groups in the ACT - IPAN ACT – you have our flyer. We are of part of a national movement of good, honourable and concerned citizens.

I'd like to acknowledge that this land is the unceded land of the First Nations and I pay my respects to the Ngunnawal and Ngambri leaders, past and present.

It's impossible to make this acknowledgement at an antiwar get together like this without also acknowledging that this country, (the basis of all our material lives), was taken by our forebears by near genocidal means, part deliberate, part not, (read about the “frontier wars” by Henry Reynolds).

If you were hoping to see a manicured Reid garden this isn't it. Jane and I think of it as a working “farmlet”.

The chooks would love a visit.

The soil here is rich and dark. We have growing here pomegranate, almonds, gooseberries, Smyrna quinces, pears, olives, Chinese quinces, apples, peaches, crab apples, cherries, mulberries, persimmon, medlars and feijoas.

The soil has been fertilized and enriched for decades by people who are long gone but who passed the fruit (literally) of their labours on to us.

Recently a young man asked me why I had planted a slow growing tree that I would never see in its full glory. It was an odd question because the answer is self evident. Almost everything we do that is good....that is moral ... is about securing a better future for the collective “us” , other living creatures, and the environment.

So what brings us all here this afternoon? Each of us has our own unique life path. But we've all ended up here now. I suspect what we all have in common is that we care. We care very much about our environment, about each other - about our common, universal humanity.

I was supposed to talk at length about "morality and war" but what I have to say doesn't take much time. I leave the complexities to the sort of philosophers who delight in complication and abstraction.

I actually did study a course called Philosophy 101, believe it or not. Thanks Gough Whitlam! Among others there was Rene Descartes and his famous formulation "I think, therefore I am". I'd turn this on its head and say "I am, therefore I think".

In this respect I am squarely in the Paul Keating camp. When asked about how he knew something he responded "because I have a brain"

Not for him the disempowering put down favoured by the "informed experts" whose implication is "you are too old, stupid or ill informed"!

The very fact you are here this afternoon suggests you too have a brain and are using it.

Back to the morality of war. I'm not an expert in anything, but I am robustly independent and critical in my thinking AND I do know something with absolute certainty: in almost all circumstances it's wrong to kill.

I also know with absolute certainty that modern warfare is mass murder on an industrial scale.

So do you!

Homo sapiens, we call ourselves. "Wise men". In evolutionary terms we are the third branch of the chimpanzee family. Close studies show chimps fight each other. They throw shit, sticks, stones, and actually tear each other apart in disputes over territory. Sound familiar?

As human society developed in complexity we developed rules to moderate our basest desires and murderous impulses.

The ancients, in my opinion, got it right "Thou Shalt Not Kill". It's a sensible rule, but so much noted for its neglect rather than adherence.

I ask you: why is it no longer socially acceptable for me to bash up my neighbour, even kill with impunity, when I have a disagreement BUT it is entirely acceptable to kill in a mass scale in what we call war with another people in a distant land?

We have so far developed our science and technology and applied it to slaughter, but are still lost in the jungle in our basest instincts.

Funny things happen in life. Our dreams are not always fulfilled. I was to be an academic historian. But I ended up a union organiser. But I did train as a historian.

There were several core elements to the discipline that I find useful, as perhaps will you

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1. Read primary sources wherever possible - don't rely on secondary sources, that is, other people's opinions.
2. Seek to verify or corroborate disputed 'facts'

3. Always look at every human dispute from the "shoes of the other" to actually understand what is going on.

Let me return to "morality" for a moment. If war is about access to resources and the power to control resources, then we must look at who is to benefit from war or conflict and who is to lose.

We never actually escape our upbringing. I was raised "to love my neighbour," learnt the parable of the "good Samaritan" and had ingrained in me a passion for justice and peace. "Blessed are the Peacemakers". Old school, I know, but there you have it.

Each of us here must feel great discomfort at current developments - the militarization, the diabolical weapons, the AUKUS agreement designed to wage war off the Chinese mainland, the heightened tensions, the incessant talk by military, political, and media "experts" about the so called threat from China.

It's an arms race. It's on.

Fear is replacing reason.

Public attitudes are manipulated in what Noam Chomsky called "the manufacture of consent".

Our task as peacemakers seems impossible.

Here we are in a rustic backyard in downtown Canberra – the dusty little capital city of a far flung province in the greatest and most powerful "Empire" the world has ever known. The Empire is a mixed bag. Like the "curates egg"; part good, part bad.

Where would we be without American music – jazz, blues, hillbilly....

It's lucky we are in the "White Men's Club" – also known as the "Five Eyes".

It's not been so lucky for many other peoples and nations who have not embraced the role of subservient ally and a junior role in the world order of the great "American Enterprise".

What chance of peace and independence do we have when "Great Powers" clash?

I remind you.

From little things big things grow.

In 1965 I marched down William St in Sydney with my parents and a handful of concerned citizens at our commitment to war in Vietnam. Old blokes came out of pubs and shouted abuse at us. I was scared.

A few years later that handful had become crowds of tens, indeed hundreds of thousands.

It's easy to give in to despair when we look at the challenges that confront us in our quest for peace.

I can imagine sometimes that we are just like drops of rain (which every gardener knows is vital for growth) but I also know that each drop can blend with another to become a bigger droplet, then a rivulet, a small stream, a river, rivers, tributaries and mighty rivers that can shift and reshape everything before it.

We can move mountains.

It would be so easy to slip into denial. To pretend the slide to potential catastrophic warfare isn't happening. To play golf. To go surfing.

To leave our fate to the experts.

Now that would be a BIG mistake. Existential issues like climate change and war in the nuclear age are far too important to be left to the experts.

We are endowed with brains, senses and reason. The greatest immorality would be for us not to use these abilities and "sleepwalk to a war" of unimaginable destruction.

The brain is reputed to be the most energy intensive organ in the body but although we are all small people we have big brains, and we are using them.

Not so clearly the experts in geopolitics, military planning, strategy and the all important world political leaders - including our own Albanese, Marles and Wong.

The world is being led by people playing out the tactics of wayward kids in the schoolyard: dare, double dare, threat, counter threat.

Sticks and stones are being collected. We are all locked into in the great game of "chicken".

Except that the sticks and stones are hypersonic missiles and the stones are nuclear weapons, and the consequences of a showdown aren't a few cuts and bruises, but the end of civilisation.

Dress the language up as they like, the game is nothing more than sandpit politics being played out by bullies who think they will come out on top by bashing each other up.

I want to say something about history from my point of view as a former student of history.

The geopolitical smarties often refer to an inevitable clash between a rising power (China) and a dominating power (the US) as the "Thucydides Trap"

Unlike them,( who I suspect have never read the "Peloponnesian Wars") the real lesson is not the apparent inevitability of conflict, but the utter barbarity into which the ancient

Greeks descended as the war wound on, hatred festered, and one monstrous and immoral atrocity led to another. War itself is an atrocity but also accretions of atrocities.

As to the nature of the looming tragedy (we know we are sitting on a powder keg just primed to go off) and the role of chance, fate or just plain old circumstance - we all make mistakes in life. We all make mistakes in our jobs. Who hasn't? For the most part there is no great consequence, at least nothing on a world scale.

But the stakes are existential if the competing militaries make mistakes as they build up their armaments and play out their bigger and better "war games" in proximity to each and China.

We should never underestimate the possibility of a terrible miscalculation, or just a plain old "stuff-up" that results in a nuclear Armageddon.

For us to see the dangers of what is coming and to do nothing is in my mind unforgivable negligence.

I joined IPAN. We have Len here from Against the Wind, a group of Christians. We have the Friends (aka the Quakers) . We have Dr Sue Wareham from MAPW - Medical Association for Prevention of War.

I plead with you. Whatever you do today, don't leave here without a steely determination to do something positive to be a peacemaker.

You can do a little by yourself. You can do a lot more together.

To quote from my old union days: "In Unity, there's Strength".

Or, in the immortal words of Joe Hill, as he faced death by firing squad: "Don't Mourn. ORGANISE".

Back to morality, for one last time.

You all have a moral duty.

To the future.

And for a future.

DP  
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