

Unleash Your Peace: A Manifesto

A platform for works whose vital principle is peace. A standing invitation to find the irenic force in what you do.

Democratic peace theory has flourished in several varieties since the Abbé de Saint-Pierre published his project for perpetual peace in 1713. At the end of that century, Kant's *Towards Perpetual Peace* looks beyond Europe to the world at large, acknowledging that lasting peace is to be achieved gradually by multiplying democracies, federating them, and perfecting our institutions. And hand in hand with the evolution of institutions goes the hope that human beings can become less murderous creatures. Norbert Elias describes one version of a civilising process and Stephen Pinker finds evidence of a heritable propensity to non-violence.

But if there is a will and a way to peace, there also persists an appetite for war. When the valetudinarian Nietzsche declares, 'War is the father of all good things,' echoing a fragment of Heraclitus two and a half thousand years earlier, he makes anthropological what in the Greek thinker is metaphysical, and seems to revel throughout his writings in the human cost. A young Winston Churchill wrote about taking part in 'a lot of jolly little wars against barbarous peoples.' Since the destruction in Ukraine began, every day on Internet forums, in politicians' press announcements, in newspaper articles and in their comments sections, bellicose mutterings tell us that the hearts of countless Uncle Tobys, brooding perhaps on an unavowable wound, beat to the drums of war.

From the Bronze Age to the present these drums tell us how war brings out the noblest qualities in human nature—as if courage, loyalty, self-sacrifice, and honour were alien to our peacetime endeavours! To extol war for showcasing such virtues is like praising onanism for its proof of sexual prowess.

Many voices warn us that the will to resist Russia's invasion of Ukraine is faltering: our effort must not be allowed to lose momentum! In this we see the native decrepitude of war, how war soon exhausts itself. Any energy it has comes from the preceding peace. Parasitic upon peace, it bloats and unfolds in an entelechy of self-annihilation, its bullets, missiles—even its bodies—predestined to be useless shards and lumps of purposeless matter. When hostilities cease, the 'peace' war declares is never more than a euphemism for its own death. But true peace, which is not a stasis but a movement, needs no momentum, for it gathers strength from its own jouissance. True peace, irenic vitality, is life itself.

If Elias's civilising process flourishes, if Pinker's optimism is justified, and on the battlefield of humanity itself the better angels of our nature philanthropically decimate the worse, all well and good. But to stage this as some Manichean locking of horns from which (we hope) perpetual peace might ultimately ensue, is a mistake. Peace is not the goal, not a resting place, not some easeful eschaton we may at last contrive for ourselves. Nor is it a requirement, a necessary environment for the blossoming of creative pursuits. If it were either, war might be a legitimate means to attain the goal or the requirement.

Let us be bold. We shall define peace other than in contradistinction to war, value it not as an interval in which great things may be achieved, nor write it as a happy lull between historical events, but rather grasp peace as a movement that consolidates all that is best in us. Our efforts to create works of literature, painting, music, architecture, scientific innovations, a more just society don't *require* peace, but embody peace itself: they are the substance of our will to peace, whose immanent principle we recognise as an irenic force for good. Let us reconceptualise peace in these terms: peace as a propulsive force.

And where is it to come from, this force? Not from our common humanity—that much is clear. In practice we are not governed by universal Kantian reason, and the fundamental needs we share are precisely what pit us most fiercely against one another. The extraterritoriality of the Internet may have brought us closer to a planet-wide Socratic conversation, a maieutic where we might hope to attend the birth of perpetual peace, as we forge apolitical and cosmopolitan alliances, but the web also ensures that the vileness and brutality of war have never been so visible. Corpses sluiced from the bloody culverts of 'military operations' bob up and float for a while in the media torrent under the spotlight of our gaze. If ignorant complacency has ever duped us into war, it can do so no longer when, saturated with these horrors, we still reach for the bombs and the flamethrowers. So, tragically, no, it is unrealistic to appeal to our common humanity.

If not from our nature, if not from what we are, then it must come from what we do.

I invite you to reveal the animating principle your work exerts upon the world. If the principle runs strong in you, express it in the form of essays, or academic papers. If the principle is feeble, I urge you to nurture it. I'll start with my own search for an irenic force. But this is only a beginning. Reconceptualise your vocation, not as a force *for* peace forever turned *towards* an ideal (and inevitably fretting against the real), but as peace incarnate.

The invitation is not confined to academics and creative professionals. I met a Royal Marine recently. Making it clear to him that my message is not pacifism, I half earnestly, half mischievously, asked him whether there might be an irenic force in what he does—not of course in the sense of a soldier's occasional peace-keeping role, but in the sense I've been describing here: an intrinsic principle that lies in soldiering. He was, understandably, perplexed as he began to think it through, and promised to continue reflecting on the question. Before we parted, we agreed that if he found such a principle, it would present a contradiction so subversive that he would have to reconsider the tenability of his calling.

Unleash your peace.

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Exeter, 2023