

Not War, nor Peace.

Are War and Peace Mutually Exclusive Alternatives?

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The Russian attack on the Ukraine, which Russia designated as a “special military operation,” began on February 24, 2022, and has been prolonged into an ongoing war of attrition not only between these two countries but between the Russian Federation and the European Union. Behind and with Europe stand its North American NATO allies, while many other countries of the world have proved to be sympathetic with Russia, at least to the extent of interpreting the Russian invasion as the fault of the Western powers, specifically their strategy of encircling Russia and more generally the evident or alleged determination on the part of the USA to

dominate everywhere in the world. Very broadly, on a global scale, the conflict has opened a deadly strife between the West and a great part of the rest of the world. Devastating war, even total war in which a people's right to self-determination and a country's very existence are at stake, has broken out again in Europe. The conflict has torn open the whole question of the order of the world. What can possibly be done, and by whom, to secure peace?

The conflict has shattered illusions that, after the two horrific world wars of the twentieth century, generalized war is no longer an option in our world of global dependencies. This comforting idea has proven all of a sudden to be false and has been rudely refuted by the shocking facts reported day by day by media at least in the West. A fever to rearm spreads rapidly throughout Europe and across the globe all the way to China pledged publicly to surpass the USA in military, economic, and technological might by 2035. We are already basically at war, and the whole world is irresistibly involved in taking sides with one of the belligerents or the other. Anyone who attempts to remain neutral is sure to be placed under pressure from one or both sides.

The Ukrainian conflict is sparking a much larger conflagration in which the great powers are revealed to be locked in a desperate death struggle, a seething, simmering, generalized state of war. The main line of division is described in the West as falling between democracy and dictatorship. The authoritarian model of government directed by presidents for life – what in former times of less subtle constitutional juggling used to be called “dictators” – is not accepted as legitimate by Western countries. And on the other side of this ideological divide, the supposedly free, democratic societies of the West are condemned as dehumanizing systems of enslavement to self-will and greed, hedonism and hubris, lacking in basic respect for others and even for oneself, steeped in a decadent, dissolute, libertarian lifestyle. Shaking off the dominion of the current world order under the thumb of the US and its allies is the agenda implicitly and sometimes explicitly promoted especially by Russia and China.

The language and objectives and typical arguing points, nonetheless, are strikingly similar on both sides. Both sides make demands of respect for countries' integrity and security; both sides affirm multipolarity and urge using dialogue and diplomacy for resolving differences rather than resorting to arms. Both sides appeal to international law and accuse the other of violations of international rights and disrespect for human beings made to serve the other power's system of tyrannical subjection of all to its own illegitimate dominion. Both sides claim to defend the

dignity and rights of people across the world against the atrocities perpetrated by violations coming from the other side.

For most of us in the Western world, this war seems an unequivocal aggression by an overweening, imperially ambitious superpower perpetrated against a weaker and obviously more vulnerable neighbor. But for many on the other side, the attack of Russia on the Ukraine is understood as a heroic act of resistance by a courageous leader and liberator – Vladimir Putin – against the intolerable actions and pretensions of Western powers and particularly the United States of America. We are the ones who have unscrupulously used every means at our disposal, including weapons of mass destruction, not excepting the nuclear bomb, in order to unilaterally dictate our own terms to the rest of the world. We are supposed to threaten Russia, jeopardizing even in its right to exist.

The unconscionable war of offensive invasion in the Ukraine is being waged, at least implicitly, in the name of challenging an unjust world order imposed by the United States of America and its allies. Russia and China, with echoes from India and elsewhere like Iran, revindicate what they call a multi-polar world order. What this means in practice is: Down with the USA and the Western block of countries within its sphere of influence. The competing and warring camps correspond roughly to democracies and dictatorships, but this line of demarcation is only very approximate and indeed brings out the contradictions underlying the whole international system of alliances. India can be counted as the world's largest democracy but has been very cooperative with Russia and Vladimir Putin. It seems that real content and differences of systems and ideologies do not finally matter. Any difference can be conceptualized so as to make a case for defending oneself and one's side, presumed to be the right and true one, from the other side intent on controlling others with no regard for justice.

Stocking up on arms and reinforcing one's own capacities to inflict violent damage on others can be justified ethically only as a necessary means for holding in check evil powers elsewhere that threaten presumably innocent and defenseless lives. Violent force, or might, is justified only for the purpose of resisting unjustified might and violent force. The problem is: What guarantees that our use of force against others is for the good and that their use of force and violence against us is evil? We presume to place ourselves morally above others in defending what we hold to be sacred values, not allowing or caring to understand that these others may understand themselves to be doing the same thing against us. We style ourselves as defenders of the free world or of social justice, and this gives us the right to hold in check, by whatever means are necessary, those who would contest and resist our force. We elect ourselves to judge what and who is evil and who is good. Russia and

China do this every bit as much as the USA and the West. On either side, one has to believe in one's own rightness, and then those who oppose and threaten one are *ipso facto* in the wrong.

All parties in our current cold world war ascribe high and noble ethical justifications to their own acts of violence. Enough horrendous crimes have been committed on all sides to justify however drastic measures of "resistance." Programs and strategies of rendering the presumably evil powers impotent to act and harm others are avowed as morally imperative to one side but are of course simply unacceptable to the other. The US secretary of defense openly stated that the objective of aid to Ukraine was to weaken Russia militarily and economically to the point where it would no longer be capable of posing a threat to its neighbors. Of course, Russia cannot see such action against it as right and just. How could it not then feel challenged to do everything in its power to weaken our ability to damage it and others.

History, however, demonstrates that it is not essentially Russians or Americans or Chinese who are intrinsically good or evil. It is the accumulation of power and wealth itself that betrays our humanity into exercising power arbitrarily and self-interestedly and unjustly. The argument that we require a build-up of violent force to resist the violent force of others falters on the false assumption that we know how to use force more justly than others do. Much more plausibly, it is the concentration and preponderance of force itself that corrupts those who possess it, whoever they are and however they paint their own self-image to themselves – as true blue or innocent white or revolutionary red.

To most observers in the West, the Russian attack on the Ukraine appears simply an immoral aggression motivated by atavistic drives and imperialistic desire for domination. But for many in Russia and also throughout the world, this "attack" appears rather to be a heroic revolt against Western, and especially American, hegemony that is the real culprit and the great Satan behind everything that is wrong with the world. For many, the root problem is America's determination to dominate and keep the entire world under its sway, whether by diplomatic persuasion or by commercial purchase or by cultural imperialism or by force of arms. Constant interventions of the American military, by far the most powerful in the world, across the globe in the so-called postwar period are readily available to lend this interpretation its plausibility in almost any context outside of the USA.

As long as we simply assert our own side in this dispute, we remain in a desperate deadlock. One side has to prevail and can do so only by annihilating, or at least irremediably "weakening," the other. As long as we aim to dominate others by force in order to prevent someone else, whom we presume to be less good and

moral and generous than ourselves, from doing so, we provoke others to try to do the same. They fear our power just as we fear theirs, and so we have war. Only if we can change our logic do we have a chance of promoting peace instead of fomenting war. We have to show, instead, our power to refrain from using force and power. This alone is power over power itself, and only this stands a chance to solicit a fundamentally unwarlike reaction from the other. Renunciation of force should be pursued as the only true power to change the world for the good of all.

Of course, such voluntary apparent “weakness” will be taken by some as their cue to take advantage and fill with their own forces the vacuum of power that is created by this renunciation. There are without doubt the likes of the Taliban all around the world waiting for just such an opportunity. A kenotic discourse of self-emptying modeled on Christ humbling himself unto death on the Cross (Philippians 2: 6-11) is not the only path and strategy that we need to follow. But it is essential that just such a message be perceived and practiced first and foremost – and in the times of relative peace that enable it to be performed without the maximum risk. No system or principle can be followed blindly. When one has to fight, as in the current situation with Russia, then that has to be done with resolution and without remorse. But such action must also be performed disinterestedly. We need to pursue rather contradictory paths simultaneously. The solution can come only through virtuous action sustained through endless self-sacrifice, not through any simple formula.

Both sides ascribe high and noble ethical motives to their own actions. Is it possible to choose one side rather than the other? Not in the long run. We have to learn to live in their tension but also to avoid the worst aspects of either agenda for self-aggrandizement of one power or the other propped up on the pretense to guarantee peace. It is impossible simply to choose peace without war, and the choice of war needs to aim at establishing peace. So far, virtually all parties are probably in agreement. But we have to be absolutely honest with ourselves about whether we are seeking the common good and common empowerment rather than control and dominion. Otherwise, we have to expect others to oppose us.

The Ukraine conflict has challenged all our means of dealing with and understanding war. War returned to Europe after the crushing disasters of the twentieth century with its devastating, double-barreled World Wars. They seemed to have put an end to war on that world-wide scale. Such total war seemed no longer possible. In postwar Europe, the former belligerents were united in a common project, even if often as competitors. But the Ukraine conflict has returned us to the condition of war – of willing the crippling and even the destruction of the other, the other nation, even the humiliation of the other people. So conceived, when our existence is understood in terms of war, it is us or them: there can only be a winner

and a loser. This leads to indulgence in images of one side and even of one people as evil and the other as righteous.

The illusion behind all this is that any party whatsoever can impose its will. We all need to give up that illusion. Whatever we impose is going to bring about all kinds of unanticipated, unforeseeable, uncontrollable, and undesired consequences. All we can do is play our role together with and alongside others. The problem in the world today is that all the heavy weights, including the USA and Europe, as well as China and India, but even smaller players in their own sphere, like Turkey or North Korea or Myanmar, want to dictate how the world should be and threaten to use all their destructive power in order have their will prevail. This is madness – or at least a defectiveness in our reasoning faculties. It appeals to the primitive instincts of national pride, which are manipulated in order to shore up fundamental existential insecurity.

The Ukraine war has demonstrated how deeply we are all involved in war already just in our posturing and taking the high moral ground to condemn Russia. We in the West are losing respect in the world even as we act high-mindedly to refuse and counter the bellicose actions of Russia. This bold-faced aggression in the form of invasion was and is shocking. We thought that everyone should and would band together at least to condemn and resist this horrible atrocity. However, what is coming out is that this manifestation of horror and atrocity is only an aspect of the horror and atrocity already operating in the system of power in the world. Our actions in supposedly defending the Ukraine are not necessarily being proved in the eyes of the rest of the world to be fundamentally better than those of the Russian “president” or dictator (the former nominative has been contested as inappropriate even within the Russian parliament itself) in attacking the Ukraine because the Ukraine seemed to be on its way to becoming another one of our satellites, an outpost for threatening Russia comparable to Cuba in the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, where the threat was reversed by decisive and risky action on President Kennedy’s part regarded as necessary and right by virtually all in the West.

Horrific as the idea seems to us, it could well be that most of the world would feel that justice is being served in the end by Putin’s winning out in this conflict. Not crushing Ukraine but breaking up the American stranglehold on the rest of the world would be perceived as the final significance of Russia’s war or “special military operation.” American domination of the world exploited for America’s own economic interests has been revealed and rejected as morally unacceptable over and over again in various parts of the world from Vietnam to Chile to Iraq.

For many the world over, the meaning of this war is that finally someone is standing up to bring that evil domination to an end – down with America, hurray!

Horribly, Russia has many strategic means at its disposal to propagate this interpretation as the low-down truth of this war – not Putin's war but America's war against Russians and Slavic peoples! As infuriating as it is, this interpretation is more convincing to many around this world than the story of Western powers rallying to the defense of an innocent and vulnerable country brutally attacked by a bigger, mightier, ruthless neighbor. At least at certain times since the conflict broke out, this sentiment has seemed to be emerging, although the Russian leader has continued to pursue the war so cruelly and unyieldingly as to make it progressively difficult to support him, even among those most disposed to oppose the West at all costs. Putin has been so relentless and unscrupulous in his attack as to gradually erode and undermine the very considerable bases for sympathy in global hatred of America that he had to work from.

The "moral" renunciation of Russian gas and petroleum has opened the market for sale of American shale produced gas, which is environmentally damaging to an exceptional degree and, to that extent, immoral. We make war always on high moral grounds but are desperately lying about our effective motivations. The American interventions in South-East Asia, conspicuously Vietnam, or in South America, Chile, for example, were billed and carried out sincerely by millions (including soldiers and their supporting staff) as resistance to the spread of communism and its repressive regimes, but they were also about maintaining hegemony and being able to impose American military authority and commercial interests all around the world. Of course, we presume that our authority is used for the good and against evildoers, but Putin's Russia, Xi's China, and every other power asserts the same. Any of these blocks can be seen as analogously symmetrical in their hypocrisy by neutral third parties. American intervention in Iraq during the Second Gulf War against the evil dictator Saddam Hussein is typically remembered as nothing but a colossal lie concerning weapons of mass destruction, which were never found. The mistake cost millions of Iraqi lives and rankles with continuing resentment to this day.

Large-scale wars (beyond skirmishes motivated by conflicting interests) are launched and fueled by big imaginations and by fecund powers of imagining that create attractive and convincing myths. The idea of a Russian Empire restored, or of One China without rival alternative systems (in Hong Kong and Taiwan or in the western province Xinjiang with its Uighur Muslim minority), or of the Free World made safe for democracy, are the imaginary myths that animate our present wars – actual, virtual, and emerging. These imaginings can inspire great sacrifice and devotion, but in order that they not lead us irreversibly into war we also need critical resources to negate them. Of course, the myths of the imagination are irrepressible

and always spring up anew in some form or other. But a discipline of always being able to distance oneself from them also needs to be cultivated endlessly. I believe in fostering the great religious myths of humankind that teach the common origin of all and direct us toward and enjoin universal love. But it is imperative to do so in a way that never delivers the individuals that believe them from total responsibility for their acts and that commands always infinite respect for everyone and everything, every creature and mountain and river.

Apophatic thinking is literally negative thinking: “apophasis” is the ordinary Greek word for negation in Plato and Aristotle. In contemporary theoretical discourse, “apophasis” frequently designates a radical form of negation leading to silence, as in mysticism. I use the term to mean negating one’s own starting point and initial prejudices, all of one’s own determinate conceptual baggage, in order to open thought infinitely to the Other. This, I contend, is the form of thinking that is necessary to establish a basis of peace and understanding between peoples and nations and individuals, with their different determinate loyalties and identities.¹

In Christian discourse, the self-emptying or *kenosis* modeled by Christ (Philippians 2: 7, *ekenosen*, “he emptied himself”) is the form that apophasis takes in action and as incarnate. Other religions deploy comparable figures of self-abnegation necessary to prepare for peace by shaping attitudes of respect and love of others. I have explored this self-subverting and self-erasing conceptuality particularly in literature, but it is in the highest degree relevant to politics and history and everything else that is human. In this direction of thinking, I believe, lie the only possible answers to our problems concerning peace in the world— if, indeed, we are willing to solve them rather than to continue to dwell within their dilemmas.

However, I repeat, apophasis and its application in *kenosis* do not provide what is necessary to survive in a conflict situation. Such an approach leads, instead, to the Christic gesture of giving up one’s own life, of pouring oneself out for others in the interest of reestablishing peace, reconciliation, and of the redemption of humanity. There are, of course, equivalents in other world religions from Islam and Buddhism to Jainism and beyond to various sorts of indigenous spiritualities. The dilemmas of war or peace, of supplying weapons or conserving neutrality, have no good solutions: all alternatives at the stage of open conflict are condemned to prove at least half false. The possibilities for constructive rather than destructive action lie upstream from these impasses. Once hard-edged identities have been formed, it is too late to work together for all in love and in infinite openness to one another. At that late stage, it is us or them – there can only be a winner and a loser. Russia or the West. China or America. One is right, the other wrong. Once we are locked into these

oppositions, we can no longer learn from each other and discover together our common interests and common humanity.

At an earlier stage, however, each party to the conflict could conceive itself as a partner and could acknowledge its mistakes and beg forgiveness for its offenses and endeavor to learn from the other. All of our systems are flawed and imperfect and stand to gain by such mutual interrogation. Why is authority necessary to govern a society, but why can it also throttle a people and its freedom? Exactly what kind of authority is necessary and beneficent, and how does it metamorphose into its opposite, the monstrous nemesis of oppression? Our differences are resources for us to experiment with and learn from: the experience of others with other alternatives is necessary for us, too. We are indeed aiming at common ends and purposes of peace and prosperity, but we have created deadly and dangerous myths of the righteousness of one way and the wrongness or evil of the other. Whereas all ways, pursued with sincere and holy intentions, lead eventually to the way that is Dao and Dharma, Allah and Christ, the truth and the life.

I have developed as “speculative criticism” a wide-open form of apophatic thinking in which poetry rhymes with theological revelation and philosophical reflection opens to the infinite.² I believe that what I have described as “apophatic” thinking (which begins from the insight that any of our consciously articulated thoughts is already the negation of something unthought) is proved to be necessary by the endemic conflicts of identity leading to war that so plague our world still today. We have to de-identify with any finite entities such as patriotic states, at least as ultimate ends and values, and re-identify more deeply with humanity as a whole. We need not to lose our openness to all peoples and to the infinite without exclusions, or we will end up at war with one another because of our mutually exclusive, but unnecessarily and unwholesomely delimited, identifications. To think that the Chinese or the Russians are bad or that any form whatever of authoritarian government is necessarily evil and wrong, or even just inferior in all circumstances, are prejudices that prevent lucid and honest evaluation. They belong rather to the primitive atavistic mechanisms that often work almost unconsciously in identity formation.

What I recommend here is not blanket pacifism. Certainly, aggressive postures and even actions are sometimes necessary according to circumstances. Countless examples in our natural environment and the animal kingdom would suggest that such striving against one another is intrinsic to life itself. Nature can be described in many of its aspects as a ceaseless war between species for survival and domination. We can perhaps not entirely escape this condition as material and mortal creatures. But we do have a further resource as rational and moral agents that enables us to

negotiate and mediate our differences and conflicts in recognition of common interests. We can choose to control ourselves and reign in our drive to dominate rather than delivering ourselves to be checked only by counter aggression. We do not have to battle each other to the death. Even in other mammal species, males vying for exclusive mating privileges and dominance of the herd stop short of such complete destruction. We should be capable of at least this degree of moderation, if not more. Our rational capacity can express itself finally in a mode of infinite self-critique.

It is well worth observing that withdrawal of force and strategies of negation are also well recognized as necessary in the art and conduct of war. Calculated withdrawal of force and resourcing of the negative by creating a void to diffuse the opponent's strength figure as key strategies of war in the most widely recognized classics on the subject from Sun Tzu's fifth-century BCE *Art of War* to Carl von Clausewitz's *On War (Vom Kriege, 1832)*.³ Deliberate withholding of force is a negative way of leveraging the positive in all of its unlimited potential. As in apophatic thinking generally, the austere negative is intimately related with the eminently positive, and the void it creates in reality as given opens toward an unlimited space for free exercise of imagination. One fascinating aspect of Clausewitz's thought is his grasp of the role of imagination and even of "genius" in war – showing the Kantian and Romantic stamp of his thought. Sun Tzu also places war in the context of great human works of imagination. These classic texts, read with emphasis on their apophatic nuances, challenge us to reconceptualize the art of war as not about destroying one's enemy but rather about accessing the superior power that can reconcile all contenders by putting them in their proper places relative to one another.

The Ukraine conflict seems to be a case where one would want to make a clear choice and not rest within apophatic ambiguity. But we can hardly make such a choice without recognizing some aspects of "war" as contextualizing any apparent peace and as embedded in almost any social order, with its hierarchies and inevitable exclusions as necessary to the rule of law. Failing such recognition, we are illuding ourselves. We would like to think that we can possess peace by itself alone. By closing our eyes to the hidden wars on which our peaceful orders are built, we are bound to accuse others of being warmongers when they undertake to challenge or even to undermine our "peace" since to them it is already war. Could a more equitable and self-aware sharing of responsibility for the oppressions involved in our social orders – against nature first and then against alternative social orders that others would seek to foster – offer a more fruitful premise for dialogue than the mutual accusations that are the order of the day in international relations and in state

diplomacy in our own day and age? The only possibility of mitigating war is through dialogue and through cultivating mutual understanding of our constraints and predicaments long before actual war starts and as the inevitable tensions accumulate and begin to emerge.

There is always a blindness to our common interest and shared destiny when war breaks out because these are ultimately spiritual values that cannot be rendered wholly explicit nor be exhaustively articulated and are therefore likely to be overlooked and neglected. Will to domination always inevitably engenders a counter will to resist and even to make war. Only a kenotic will that asserts itself in relinquishing all domination and in making a place for the others to express and realize themselves can work against the fatal dialectical tendencies producing war. To will not to dominate, willing against willing, apophatic willing, is the only way, I submit, to positively engender peace.

We have to acknowledge that no nation among us is truly or permanently at peace. Peace is something to be positively fostered by constant work and effort of self-abnegation and deference to others. All the world religions affirm and teach this in one way or another. So do secular, atheistic humanisms, often in the name of “solidarity” or similar shibboleths. Such peace can be productively practiced only at a stage of human relations before war breaks out when the competitive, rivalrous tendencies leading to it can still be negated and elicit reciprocal action in kind. Once war breaks out between competing parties, it is too late because then there are victims in an immediate and irrecusable perspective needing to be defended against aggressors by all possible means. But we can and need to concentrate our efforts on building peace where this is still possible – and it is possible between all peoples, with no exclusions.

Summer-Fall 2022

Acknowledgment. I gratefully acknowledge the critical reading and suggestions of John van Dyke, United States Navy Chaplain and graduate of the U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI, and of Steven E. Knepper of the Virginia Military Institute, Department of English, Rhetoric, and Humanistic Studies.

¹ I construct a tradition of classic sources for such thinking in *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 2 vols., edited with Theoretical and Critical Essays by William Franke. I develop *A Philosophy of the Unsayable* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014) and turn it in a

comparative direction in *Apophatic Paths from Europe to China: Regions Without Borders* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018).

² Following up on my books developing such a theory, I plan to publish two volumes to be titled *Speculative Philology*. I broach this idea in “Prolegomena to a Speculative Criticism of Literature,” *Analecta Hermeneutica* 14/2 (2022): 194-205, Commencement, Continuation, Conversation: Commencement Addresses. I expound the concept in a seminar at the Newberry Center for Renaissance Studies in Chicago: [Dr William Franke at the Newberry: 'Speculative Philology' September 8, 2018 - YouTube](#)

³ Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege* (Berlin: Dümmlers, 1832), trans. as *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976). Sun Tzu, *The Art of Warfare*, trans. Roger T. Ames (New York: Ballentine Books, 1993).