

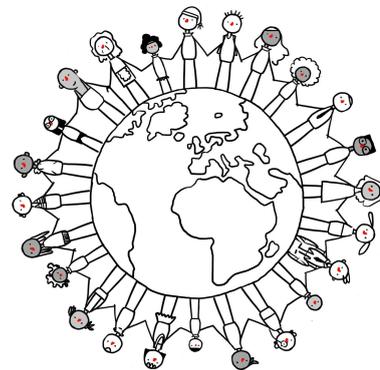
# Humanist Perspective

## War and peace



'Either man will abolish war, or war will abolish man.'

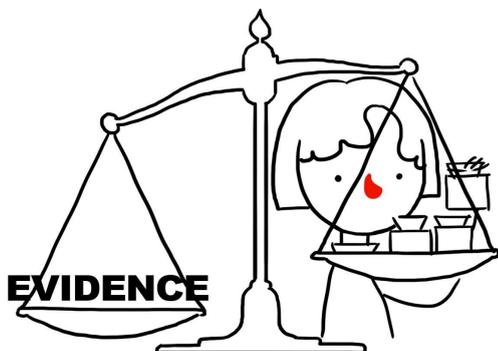
Bertrand Russell,  
humanist philosopher



When considering ethical questions, humanists try to use **evidence**, **empathy**, and a concern for the **happiness** and wellbeing of human beings and other sentient life. Believing this is the one and only life we have makes many humanists think very carefully before supporting any war, both because of the likely loss of life involved, and because of the impact on the survivors.

There is no universally agreed humanist perspective on war. Many humanists believe we should always seek non-violent solutions to our disagreements. Some are pacifists and believe war should always be avoided. Many humanists strongly support the work of the United Nations (UN) aimed at resolving conflicts between nations peacefully, and some were actively involved in its formation.

Some humanists, however, believe that sometimes war can be justified on the grounds of self-defence or to protect the lives and the freedoms of others. Typically, humanists believe we need to look at all the available **evidence** and carefully consider the potential **consequences** before any decision to go to war.



'All wars are started by human beings and war can be ended by human beings working together. Violent conflict is hugely destructive, ruining lives, wasting resources, and degrading the environment. Sometimes it may be the only way of preventing greater harm, but it should always be the very last resort and we should work to end it...

'As individuals we must work for peace in our lives. We must also work within the neighborhoods, nations, networks and organizations of which we are part to foster peace among ourselves and a peaceful attitude towards others.'

Oslo Declaration on Peace,  
Humanists International



The horrors of war, and the consequences for innocent people and the environment, make many humanists, as well as many other people, question the likelihood of the existence of a good and all-powerful deity.

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### Causes of war

Wars throughout human history have often been influenced by a tribal instinct, the desire to protect our territory or community, or an aggressive ambition to gain an advantage over a different group. Many humanists believe we can use our natural capacities for **reason** and **empathy** to overcome some of our less desirable natural instincts.

Often wars have been fought over religious differences. Wars fought on religious grounds can also be motivated by other aims. However, any 'holy war' fought 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 opposed by humanists.

Some of the most destructive regimes in the past century have been atheist (e.g. Stalinism in the Soviet Union, Mao's Communism in China, and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia). However, these regimes were also authoritarian and built on a system of unquestionable doctrines that denied their citizens freedom and rights. They were very different from the liberal democracies that humanists typically support.

### Weapons of mass destruction

There is no single humanist perspective on nuclear weapons. Some see them as an unacceptable threat to humanity; others as a potentially useful deterrent. Humanists will try to consider the evidence and base their views on what is likely to lead to the least harm, while acknowledging that this decision can often be difficult.

The suffering caused by chemical weapons and the threat they pose to civilians make many humanists feel their use can never be justified.



'The nuclear arms race is like two sworn enemies standing waist deep in gasoline, one with three matches, the other with five.'

Carl Sagan,  
astronomer and humanist

### Humanist Emily McCullouch is a Squadron Leader in the Royal Air Force

As humanists we consider ourselves members of the human family, and that means that it's our duty to try to protect the other members of that family. I don't think that in an ideal world



there would be a need for an armed force to achieve that, but when situations arise where there is a need for an armed force, I think it is important that there are people who are prepared to do that.

Knowing that you have only one life, it makes the decision to potentially sacrifice that life for the benefit of society a very meaningful decision. As humanists, we are committed to improving the world and trying to make it a better place – so, if you can make a sacrifice in order to improve the lives of other people, then I think that aligns with humanist values.

My work has led me to encounter a lot of people. Some of them are from very different backgrounds to me, and have very different worldviews to me. I think that my humanism has led me to try to be tolerant and patient, and to try to understand the views of others rather than dismissing them or getting into confrontations. It's something that I call on quite often.

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### Just war

'When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire, the Church... 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, humanist philosopher

This is the heart of what has come to be known as 'just war' theory. It is the dominant way of thinking about war in the modern world and has become part 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. First, 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?



Second, and perhaps more fundamentally, can we easily make the distinction between those who are 'innocent' and those who are not? Many soldiers have not chosen to go to war; they are forced to fight. Are their deaths just as terrible as those of civilians? If all wars involve killing the innocent, aren't we back to the impossibility of justifying war at all?

It is difficult for many humanists to lay down absolute principles on this. Humanists have to consider the consequences in the particular situation. 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. On these grounds, some will argue that war can sometimes be justified. The Second World War led to huge destruction and millions of deaths, but if Nazism had not been resisted, then the outcome might have been even worse. War can perhaps, on some occasions, represent human beings' ability to act communally in the interests of others.

Humanists would like to see a world without war, where all people can live in peace with one another. It may be that the ultimate goal of peace can't be achieved without some conflict in order to get there. Nonetheless, all too often wars achieve little except terrible suffering, leaving a legacy of bitterness that can sow the seeds for future wars. Many humanists will argue that we should therefore always consider carefully and critically the reasons our leaders and governments provide for going to war, and do whatever we can to encourage a peaceful solution.

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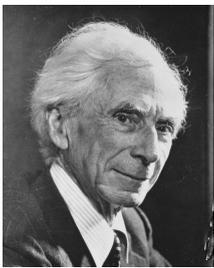
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### Peace and pacifism

Many humanists have been involved in working for peace. After the Second World War, humanists helped to set up the United Nations (UN) and many humanists today support its work to find peaceful solutions to international disagreements.

### Humanists working for peace



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,

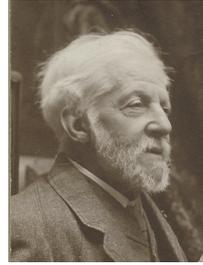
for which he was imprisoned. The rise of Nazism in Germany, however, led him to state that, although war was always a great evil, in some circumstances it might be the lesser of two evils. In 1958, he became the first president of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND).



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.'



Felix Moscheles (1833-1917) was a painter and peace activist. He was President of the International Arbitration and Peace Association and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. He was also an advocate of an international

language called Esperanto, which he believed would increase understanding between people across countries and reduce conflict.



Julian Huxley (1887-1975), first President of the British Humanist Association, was the first director of The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which was founded in 1945

to promote international peace through education, science, and cooperation.



Helena Swanwick (1864-1939) was a peace campaigner who vigorously opposed what she saw as the stupidity and inhumanity of war. She was awarded the Companion of Honour in recognition of her work for peace.



Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner (1858-1935) was the founding Chair of the Rationalist Peace Society, formed in 1910 'to carry on Peace propaganda on Rationalist lines'.

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### Humanists on peace



'Humanists have never lost sight of the abiding wisdom that peace starts with the individual and must grow within communities... genuine peace requires more than just the absence of war and violence. Lasting peace must be dynamic not static. We must embrace the noisy peace of the thriving city, not seek to escape to the silent peace of the graveyard. Peace is an active process, a way of solving problems justly and without violence.'

Sonia Eggerickz,  
former president of Humanists International



'The best way to achieve peace is to work for human rights, gainful employment for all, fairness, equal opportunity for all... Practical efforts for achieving peace include government aid, organisations working for fair wages and human rights, strong ethical systems, the promotion of good science, and, paradoxically, democratic governments with strong armed forces. (Sometimes peace can only be achieved by fighting just wars, like the North against the South during the Civil War to abolish slavery in the U.S.)

Norm R. Allen Jr.,  
author of *The Black Humanist Experience*



'Curiosity, solidarity and a feeling of belonging to a global family of animals, in which every human is like a sibling to us: these qualities could form a state of mind which is needed for peace. People should stop perceiving everyone in the instinctive categories of "them" and "us"... When you forget all of these labels and start looking at another human being as a human being, nothing more and nothing less, only then you will seriously start valuing that person's life. And only if you value life, will you stop a war.'

Kaja Bryx, European Humanist Federation



'We must recognise that the state of peace means more than the absence of war... A state of peace means people living together despite differences, which means they must be talking about their differences openly and honestly in an 'open society'... Peace, then, is not an abstract harmony that we can hope will descend upon us by wishing for it. It is something that will prevail – and can only be sustained – when our most universal and necessary human values are being fulfilled.'

Andrew Copson, Chief Executive, Humanists UK



'We can build peace through the revolution of small things, every day, at every time, respecting each other, empowering women, and recognising the value of every human being, especially if he/she is different from me.'

Sofia Vinasco-Molina, Colombian peacebuilder



'Humanistically speaking, peace is vital for the realisation of happiness in the here and now. It is a resource that is needed in living to its fullness this only life we have.'

Leo Igwe,  
Humanist Association of Nigeria



'A constant theme in the literature of war, historical and literary, is the scene where a soldier encounters, perhaps kills, an enemy combatant and then becomes aware, by talking to him, or by looking through the papers and photos of the dead man, that the enemy is a human being just like himself. Essential to creating a culture of peace, then, is the activity of bringing people together, sharing human experiences, overcoming stereotypes, promoting the awareness of our shared humanity. And that's humanism.'

Richard Norman, author of *On Humanism*

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**Sharon Booth, Founder and Director of [Solutions Not Sides](#)**

Someone once said to me that there are three topics you should avoid at a polite dinner party: death, sex, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Joking aside, in 2010, I decided to tackle one of these topics head-on: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

After living in the Middle East and North Africa for six years, I returned to the UK and piloted an education project to help people of differing opinions discuss this most controversial of topics in our current political landscape. You might call it 'the art of respectful disagreement'.

After the research phase, which involved engaging with university students, professors, school teachers and pupils, and Jewish, Christian, and Muslim leaders, I ran the first one-week tour in 2011 with an Israeli volunteer and a Palestinian volunteer in schools and community groups in London. The sessions provided three things in a safe space for the participants: a humanising encounter with young people from the region, the opportunity to hear diverse narratives on the subject, and the application of critical thinking skills in a solutions-oriented discussion exercise.

I originally came to this subject through my Christian faith and my study of theology. However, at around the time I started the project in 2010, I left that faith and became a humanist. My design of the project came about through my increasing understanding of humanist teachings about the importance of every human life, as we only get this one chance of pursuing peace and happiness before the curtains close – we have no proof of a divine or heavenly consolation that will 'make up' for the fact that we got a bad deal in this life.

I am interested in human sociological behaviour and psychology – why we believe what we believe even without any empirical evidence, and why we cling to group identities, sometimes in a desperate cycle of violence. The 'we' in the cyclical narratives driving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is key. 'We are under occupation, we have the right to resist' versus 'we are under existential threat, we have the right to defend ourselves'.

Hence, I named the programme 'Solutions Not Sides', and, to date, we have had over 33,000 participants in our sessions. Positive feedback from students and community members has centred around certain learning outcomes and emotional transformation. The learning outcomes have included discovering that there are many different points of view on the conflict and the history; that the media is not to be blindly trusted; that the vast majority of ordinary people on both sides just want peace, freedom, security, and the right to live a dignified life; and that violence will likely lead to continued conflict and suffering, not conflict resolution.

The inspiration for the name came from the philosophy that in any situation of conflicting interests, supporting one side against the other to achieve a win-lose outcome will most likely lead to lose-lose, and will put real and lasting peace further away. Instead, we should be seeking to understand the needs and interests of those on both sides – the reasons why people think and act the way they do, and then use that understanding to bring about creative change that will meet as many of those needs as reasonably possible. The emotional transformation that occurs through our sessions is the driving force that helps people to embrace this approach. It is very hard to keep hating a whole group of people when you have met even just one person from that group with whom you experience empathy and a human connection.

This is where I find that humanism can help us. The key lies in the term itself, which indicates that, at rock bottom, we are all human beings. We all share the same basic needs (pretty well summed-up by Maslow's hierarchy of needs), and as the late Jo Cox MP put it: 'We have more in common than that which divides us'. Diversity of culture, language, opinion, belief, gender, orientation, clothing, cuisine, etc. can all be celebrated and expressed safely and without threat to anyone beneath an umbrella that recognises our right to those individual identities and preferences equally, whilst also exhorting us all to extend the grace of acceptance and understanding to those who are not exactly like us, but in the end are in so many ways the same.

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### Pale Blue Dot



The *Pale Blue Dot* is a photograph of Earth taken by the Voyager 1 space probe from a distance of six billion kilometres away. It was taken at the request of the astronomer Carl Sagan on 14 February 1990. 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.

'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 (1934-1996), astronomer** (Photo credit: NASA)

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### The Oslo Declaration on Peace

*The 2011 World Humanist Congress, gathered in Oslo, Norway, on 12-14 August 2011, adopted the following declaration on peace:*

Many Humanists, from the Carvaka teachers of ancient India to Bertrand Russell and from the Epicureans in ancient Europe to Jawaharlal Nehru, have worked hard for peace. Holding individual human lives to have irreplaceable value, accepting that all problems confronting humanity must be solved in the here and now, and committed to the active use of human reason and empathy in addressing them, we believe that:



All wars are started by human beings and war can be ended by human beings working together. Violent conflict is hugely destructive, ruining lives, wasting resources, and degrading the environment. Sometimes it may be the only way of preventing greater harm, but it should always be the very last resort and we should work to end it.

This is possible. Just as human science has placed the means of total destruction in our hands, so too can a scientific understanding of humanity help us understand and overcome the causes of war. We are not biologically hard-wired for inevitable violent conflict and our nature as social animals can in fact be a source of peace, though we must work hard and make consciously ethical choices to control our behavior.

Peace is more than just the absence of war. Peace requires respect for the worth and dignity of our fellow human beings, tolerance among individuals, and harmony within each person. It also requires global justice in place of global inequalities, not least the elimination of hunger and thirst in a world that produces plenty.

The excessive stock piling of arms around the world is a threat to peace. The build up of arms wastes resources that would be better used to eliminate poverty and provide education, health and other public services. Arms races create political and military instability and increase the chances of war and therefore working for disarmament is an important move in the direction of a more secure peace.

The United Nations, as envisaged in its original charter, remains the best available international vehicle for the promotion of peace and cooperation. We should urge all our national governments to adhere to the principles of the UN Charter at all times and to work for a better United Nations.

However, peace initiatives cannot be left solely in the hands of governments. As individuals we must work for peace in our lives. We must also work within the neighborhoods, nations, networks and organizations of which we are part to foster peace among ourselves and a peaceful attitude towards others.

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Unfortunately, self-identified communities are often better at promoting peace among their own members than between themselves and other groups. Healthy pride in our own traditions and people can too easily turn to unhealthy competition or even contempt for other people. Too often communities resort to a shared hostility to a common enemy as a way of bolstering their internal unity. Human beings must constantly strive to overcome these divisions and work together in support of our shared human rights and human values.

States should move towards democracy and secularism to ensure that all individuals of whatever cultural or religious affiliation are given equal treatment in society and support dialogue between people of different beliefs to reduce tensions and increase mutual understanding.

Lasting peace must be dynamic not static. We must embrace the noisy peace of the thriving city and not seek to escape to the silent peace of the graveyard. Peace is an active and continuous process, a way of solving problems justly and without violence.

We commit ourselves to working for a more peaceful world by enabling Humanists in different nations to make links with each other in a more global Humanist community, by encouraging peaceful interaction with those of different beliefs, and steadfastly committing our delegations to the UN and other international institutions to the cause of fostering a more peaceful global culture.

We assert the fundamental importance of education from early childhood and throughout life in building a more peaceful culture and support all national and international developments which advance education for peace.

We urge each of our member organizations and Humanists globally to work for a more peaceful culture in their own nations and urge all governments to prefer the peaceful settlement of conflicts over the alternative of violence and war.<sup>1</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> [The Oslo Declaration on Peace - Humanists International](#)