



A Battle from Within: A Reconstruction of Bertrand Russell's Ethical Perception of Warfare

Sean Patrick Mercado
University of Santo Tomas
Email: seanpatrick.mercado.ab@ust.edu.ph

Abstract

Wars have plagued human history and continue to haunt our society. Great civilizations died fighting, while our current generation marches to extinction. Due to this, many have sought to understand the phenomenon of war, aiming to establish a concrete justification for its occurrence and to find hope for the possibility of its eradication. This paper aims to analyze warfare considering Bertrand Russell's ethics of war. A return to Russell's ethics is significant as it deviates from tracing wars' roots in economic, political, and social factors, but moves inward to the human being itself. However, a certain ambivalence is present in his ethical perception of war brought by his shifting ethical standpoint. Thus, this paper will present the dilemma that altered the progression of his ideas. It will expose his positions in justifying warfare while consequently demonstrating his advocacy for peace and nuclear disarmament. Fundamentally, it will ground its arguments on Russell's emotivism, which argues that wars are products of innate natural warlike impulses and desires found within humanity, highlighting that to understand wars is to understand our own humanity. Amidst the seemingly inevitable occurrence of wars brought by our own humanity, the ultimate priority will always be the survival of life.

Keywords: Bertrand Russell, ethics, war, emotivism, pacifism

Introduction

History has never ceased to be written. Though countless pasts are still lost to memories, the records found in our history books are proof of the richness of the past and the story of the progress of humanity. Undeniably, many shifts have already taken place from the very first evidence of our human existence in history toward the current data we have. Our culture, our community, our language, our technologies, and our very life itself seemingly did not remain the same. This suggests that the very essence of the movement in history is change. However, one thing that seemed to be constant in our historical records is the presence of warfare. From the stories of the first humans, the ancient civilizations, the medieval periods, and up to the present time, all present their own stories of conflicts between human beings. As wars progressed through history, their intensity and destructive capabilities grew. The advancement of technology in our society is a double-edged sword, which has given way to the promotion and preservation of human life, and at the same time led to the production of armaments that could annihilate this life in an instant. Modern warfare, compared to the wars of the past, is more threatening because it has greater power to destroy and kill.

On the 24th day of February 2022, a war between two nations emerged. This day marked the coordinated invasion of Russia into different areas in Ukraine near its borders. From Belarus, the northern part, to the Crimean peninsula, for the southern part, and to Luhansk and Donetsk, the eastern territories of Russia, Ukraine had to brace itself for facing attacks that were coming from different points and aimed to close in on Ukraine.¹ Moreover, on the 7th day of October 2023, Israel was attacked by Hamas, a Palestinian militant group, which killed around 1200 individuals, while more than 33,000 Palestinians were killed in Gaza when Israel counterattacked.² With the evidence presented above, it is clear that the experience of war continues to live on. It persists in haunting humanity with destruction.

¹ John Psaropoulos, "Timeline: Six Months of Russia's War in Ukraine," *Aljazeera*, August 24, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/24/timeline-six-months-of-russias-war-in-ukraine>.

² "Israel Gaza War: History of the Conflict Explained," *BBC News*, April 5, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-44124396>.

The prevalence of wars in history and the current ongoing threats to humanity pose as necessary grounds to review our understanding of the underlying causes of warfare. I am convinced that doing so might offer possible solutions to war's mitigation or, ideally, even its elimination. Having this aim, I came across the philosophical writings of Bertrand Russell that attempted to provide a better analysis and understanding of warfare. In engaging with his works, I realized how his ideas possess the possibility to give impetus to prospective solutions in understanding and addressing the problems posed by war. His ethical framework reverts to the emotive aspect of human beings in understanding morality and events such as warfare.³ Understanding his framework is to accept the actuality that Russell's ethical standpoint on war is ambivalent. There are wars that Bertrand Russell considered to be justified. Thus, there were instances in Russell's lifetime where he favored warfare. But there were also instances when he shifted his views, resented warfare, and advocated for peace. In a nutshell, Russell argues that "war grows out of ordinary human nature."⁴ For him, wars are manifestations of innate warlike impulses and desires buried deep within humanity's very being. To achieve the possibility of war's eradication, Russell advocates the need for the cultivation and redirection of these destructive tendencies toward creative possibilities.⁵

In this paper, I mainly aim to present Bertrand Russell's ethical perception of war. Primarily, I will present a discussion of how Russell attempted to argue for what truly causes the different wars that occur in history. This portion of the essay will include a discussion of human nature and humanity's inclination toward conflict. After this, I will delve into Russell's article, "The Ethics of War."⁶ In which I will expound on how Russell categorized war according to the possibility of their justification. Lastly, I will dare to navigate and weave together the progression of Russell's shifting views, discussing his naturalism, utilitarianism, and pacifism.

The Reality of Our Humanity: Unveiling War's Beginnings

³ Bertrand Russell, *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2013), 25.

⁴ Bertrand Russell, *Why Men Fight* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 2.

⁵ Russell, *Why Men Fight*, 21.

⁶ See Bertrand Russell, "The Ethics of War," *International Journal of Ethics* 25, no. 2 (1915), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2376578?origin=JSTOR-pdf>.

Russell's argument on tracing war's genesis deviates from a trend of looking at war by considering other factors, such as economics and politics. War exists because humans exist. We could make countless reasons and excuses why wars were waged throughout history, but all these will return to our very humanity when we refer to Russell's naturalist view. To continue, Russell argues:

The ultimate fact from which war results is not economic or political and does not rest upon any mechanical difficulty of inventing means for the peaceful settlement of international disputes. The ultimate fact from which war results is the fact that a large proportion of mankind has an impulse to conflict rather than harmony and can only be brought to cooperate with others in resisting or attacking a common enemy. This is the case in private life as well as in the relations of States... The impulse to quarrelling and self-assertion, the pleasure of getting one's own way despite opposition, is native to most men. It is this impulse, rather than any motive of calculated self-interest, which produces war and causes the difficulty of bringing about a World-State. And this impulse is not confined to one nation; it exists, in varying degrees, in all the vigorous nations of the world.⁷

We are hardwired for war – explaining why wars have been waged and are continually waged. In addition, in this view of Russell, he saw the importance of the expression of human nature, even through war, to be of importance to preserve our humanity and sanity. Moreover, as a natural activity, war is not an endeavor waged for a prospective outcome because, rooted in impulses and desires, it is nature that demands a response, and the outcome will be scrutinized after nature has been fulfilled.⁸

⁷ Russell, *Why Men Fight*, 66.

⁸ Russell, *Why Men Fight*, 46.

"It is in the nature of man to be in conflict with something."⁹ Through this statement alone, one may grasp a clear preliminary understanding of why wars occur for Russell – wars are manifestations of human nature. Russell offers three kinds of conflicts that humanity faces: conflicts between man and nature, conflicts between man and other men, and conflicts between man and himself.¹⁰ The first war, which is against nature, is essential because it determines whether humanity will survive or not. As this battle is conquered by humanity continuously in the long run, they continue to develop newer skills and methods in order to not just merely adapt to the demands of nature but to control it.¹¹ In this current age, worries for survival decrease as the different technological advancements in food production, structures that can withstand calamities, and machinery that monitors natural threats increase. The consequence of this is the surplus of energy and the dissatisfaction of an inherent drive to conflict with something; thus, directing humans to wage conflict with one another to satisfy their drive.¹² The last kind of conflict, conflicts between man and himself, plays a crucial role in the progression of Russell's ethics on wars because he argues that this conflict within oneself provides possible explanations for the roots of the wars that occur in the world.¹³ To discover what makes wars actualized, it is essential to look inwardly into the human person. The answer lies within. It can be found in the inherent drives that push humans to conflict with one another and engage in one another's annihilation.¹⁴

According to Russell, "war grows out of ordinary human nature."¹⁵ The nature of human beings yields a certain kind of nature that leads to war.¹⁶ With this thinking, it equates the engagement in

⁹ Bertrand Russell, *New Hopes for a Changing World* (Delhi: L.G. Publishers & Distributors, 2019), 13.

¹⁰ Russell, *New Hopes for a Changing World*, 13-14.

¹¹ Irving Louis Horowitz, "Bertrand Russell on War and Peace," *Science & Society* 21, no. 1 (1957): 33, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40400481>.

¹² Horowitz, "Bertrand Russell on War and Peace," 33-34.

¹³ Russell, *New Hopes for a Changing World*, 14.

¹⁴ Russell, *New Hopes for a Changing World*, 33.

¹⁵ Horowitz, "Bertrand Russell on War and Peace," 33.

¹⁶ The usage of human nature here and in the previous paragraph intends to point toward the same thing that it is natural for man to be in conflict or at war with something or someone. However, human nature in the former paragraph

war to be a fulfillment of one's humanity because it is innate to engage in such. Being in conflict is just an act of concretizing one's humanity. This conflictual nature is in line with Russell's claims of the roots of human activities, impulse, and desire. It is not reason that governs our actions; rather, it is different impulses and desires that make humans do what they do. Desires are human actions that arise from one's discontent and are believed to bring a sense of fulfillment and happiness, and are considered to be in the realm of the conscious. On the other hand, impulses are rooted in one's instinct or feelings and devoid of any particularly determined ends or purpose. They are to be classified as among the unconscious parts of humanity.¹⁷ It may be unreasonable, but humans' emotions are not fully governed by reason. "All human activity is prompted by desire or impulse."¹⁸ This idea of Bertrand Russell is reflected in his perception of ethics as "emotivism," where the question of what is ethical and not is in the realm of what one feels and what one's emotions are.¹⁹

Conflicts and multiple wars have been fought in human history already. However, those men who went to war were led by unconscious impulses to engage in war, making them believe that a certain desirable outcome would be an offshoot of their action.²⁰

The war has grown, in the main, out of the life of impulse, not out of reason or desire. There is an impulse of aggression, and an impulse of resistance to aggression. Either may, on occasion, be in accordance with reason, but both are operative in many cases in which they are quite contrary to reason. Each impulse produces a whole harvest of attendant beliefs.²¹

encompasses the general inclination toward conflict while the latter intends to deal more with the particulars – with what constitutes this inclination for conflict.

¹⁷ Russell, *Why Men Fight*, 3-4.

¹⁸ Bertrand Russell, "Politically Important Desires," in *Russell: The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*, ed. Robert E. Egner and Lester E. Denonn (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 447.

¹⁹ Russell, *Human Society in Ethics and Politics*, 25.

²⁰ Bertrand Russell, "The War and Non-Resistance: A Rejoinder to Professor Perry," *International Journal of Ethics* 26, no. 1 (1915): 24, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2376733?origin=JSTOR-pdf>.

²¹ Russell, *Why Men Fight*, 8.

Bertrand Russell maintains the idea that it is impulse and not reason that produces wars. In this view, wars can be regarded as mere normal human activities, like what they typically do when they have the urge to sleep or to eat.²² These impulses may be compared to a certain programming in the human mind that makes human beings hardwired for engaging in warfare.

In addition, it is also in this instinctive part of our humanity where one can find possible explanations for why social co-operation and unity among groups are present in societal relations. Russell traced this instinctive portion from our earliest human ancestors. He argues that these ancestors possess an instinctive mechanism, which has been passed down through generations, that is responsible for establishing friendship within the tribe and hostility with those from outside.²³ Conflicts between human relationships do not cease to exist and instead escalate because of this instinctual drive. We continue to instinctively separate our neighbors into either a friend or a foe.²⁴ Peace is possible for our friends, while war and conflict are our solution for our enemies.

As mentioned in the first portions of this section, the advancements of modern day have made human life secure and inactive, but with this comes the feeling of ennui, an unfulfilled love of excitement.²⁵ Russell suggested that this love of excitement is incorporated into our being when men had to struggle and hunt to survive. This experience of excitement started to disappear when survival was made easier, and humans were kept occupied by other endeavors; thus, the outbreak of war gives satisfaction for some since it caters to their love of excitement.²⁶ Moreover, war serves as an opportunity to break the monotony of life. From a nation that had been in long slumber and dedicated in promoting good, peace, and order, war wakes a nation from this cautious slumber toward “public madness” in which one feel a certain belongingness to a nation willing to go beyond its routinary practices and take risks in which one may indulge in the thrills of the uncertainties of combat and be involved in difficult military enterprises in which one stimulates the feelings of

²² Horowitz, “Bertrand Russell on War and Peace,” 35-36.

²³ Russell, *Authority and the Individual*, 11-13

²⁴ Russell, *Authority and the Individual*, 16.

²⁵ Russell, *Why Men Fight*, 54.

²⁶ Russell, *Human Society in Ethics and Politics*, 165-166.

adventure.²⁷ The outbreak of wars enabled some members of society to be reunited with their long-lost selves, brought by civilized society. They were permitted to follow their primitive instincts and appeal more to their innate humanity. As Russell put forward, “the old primitive passions, which civilization has denied, surge up all the stronger for repression. In a moment, imagination and instinct travel back through the centuries, and the wild man of the woods emerges from the mental prison in which he has been confined.”²⁸

Exhaustively, it has been argued that wars are by-products of impulses and desires that are a natural part of human nature. For that reason, one might begin to wonder and ask: Am I just a mere slave of my natural tendencies, or can I transcend these intricacies of my humanity? To such a degree, with desires and impulses being natural, one cannot do anything to eradicate them. This shows that something natural is hard to control since it would find its way to break loose from whatever bounds one would set. Our warlike tendencies may be compared to water, which will find its natural flow or path whenever it is blocked. In some cases, water would find its way, which it inflicts greater damage when it asserts its flow. Similarly, warlike impulses and desires would find their way if they were suppressed. It may be said to be an easy solution to just suppress and control these warlike tendencies; however, in doing so, we might cause the production of another set of impulses that are more catastrophic compared to just allowing the previously mentioned impulses and desires to be expressed.²⁹ According to Russell:

The complete control of impulse by will, which is sometimes preached by moralists and often enforced by economic necessity, is not really desirable. A life governed by purposes and desires, to the exclusion of impulse, is a tiring life; it exhausts vitality and leaves a man, in the end, indifferent to the very purposes which he has been trying to achieve. When a whole nation lives in this way, the whole nation tends to become feeble, without enough grasp to recognize and overcome the obstacles to its desires. Industrialism

²⁷ Russell, *Why Men Fight*, 54-55.

²⁸ Russell, *Why Men Fight*, 55.

²⁹ Russell, *Why Men Fight*, 7.

and organization are constantly forcing civilized nations to live more and more by purpose rather than impulse. In the long run, such a mode of existence, if it does not dry up the springs of life, produces new impulses, not of the kind which the will has been in the habit of controlling or of which thought is conscious.³⁰

For Russell, it is a necessity for the impulses and desires that lead to war to find expression, or else life would not be worth living anymore. Society would have to accept the seemingly harsh reality that the outbreak of war is necessary since this is what the humanity of its citizens demands for them to find satisfaction. In addition, Russell argues that though society would want to cultivate what is socially deemed good, those who are regarded as anti-social must not be left unchecked, and worse, forced to non-expression. This is because suppression would result in an accumulation that increases its intensity, which might lead to an even more harmful and cruel expression.³¹ The extreme denial of natural impulses might result in a tension that is as bad as that aimed to be denied.³²

An Explicit Article on War's Ethics

In Bertrand Russell's numerous writings, his discussion regarding the ethics of war is scattered. He gave his opinions on what circumstances or causes can justify wars. An epitome of his discussion on war ethics can be seen in his article, "The Ethics of War." It is here that Russell categorized wars and explicitly identified which kinds of wars are justified or would have possible justifications. Initially, he presented an approach to war from a juridical standpoint, based on written documents such as treaties agreed upon by different nations, where, when the other party makes a move that is contrary to what was agreed upon, it makes initiating an attack against that party ethical. With this juridical standpoint in mind and by also exposing the horrors of warfare in this article, Russell proposes to look at a more genuine justification of war by considering the balance of good and evil that such an endeavor would bring to humanity, and to move

³⁰ Russell, *Why Men Fight*, 7.

³¹ Russell, *Education and the Social Order*, 37-38.

³² Russell, *Authority and the Individual*, 17.

away from seeing war's justification in consideration of technicalities present in documents from previous agreements.³³ Furthermore, this article continues what was discussed in the earlier sections and is still grounded in tracing ethics from feeling. Russell maintains that the different opinions which one may conceive of about war are not a result of reason but of feelings, since "the fundamental facts in this, as in all ethical questions, are feelings; all that thought can do is to clarify and systematize the expression of those feelings."³⁴ In addition, this article hints that Russell was not a pacifist. As pointed out by Laura Slot, the presentation of his 'systematized and clarified feelings' on wars presents that he was not entirely against wars because there were wars that he permitted.³⁵

To identify which wars are justified, Russell distinguished among four different categories of wars: (i) wars of colonization, (ii) wars of principle, (iii) wars of self-defense, and (iv) wars of prestige. Each will be discussed in the following paragraphs; nonetheless, as a quick overview, the first two were claimed by Russell to be usually justified, the third can be rarely justified, and the fourth category can never be justified.³⁶

Wars of colonization are those wars that were waged to invade the territories of their enemies by eliminating the said territories' current occupants. Wars of colonization, at first glance, might not be agreeable, but their positive result will be less blurry in the long run when the extension of the civilized world is observed. On the other hand, wars of principle are wars waged based on a strong conviction of the superiority of one's belief compared to the other. It is argued by Russell that it is through such wars that people will find those beliefs, which were once unreasonable, possibly by ignorance or natural depravity, to be reasonable when presented by the threats of war.³⁷ Wars between religious beliefs and wars between ideologies, which paved the way for revolutions, can be considered as wars of this kind.

³³ Russell, "The Ethics of War," 127-128; 130.

³⁴ Russell, "The Ethics of War," 127.

³⁵ Laura Slot, "Consistency and Change in Bertrand Russell's Attitude towards War" (Master's Thesis: Utrecht University, Netherlands, Sidestone Press, 2008), 19, <https://www.sidestone.com/books/consistency-and-change-in-bertrand-russell-s-attitude-towards-war>.

³⁶ Russell, "The Ethics of War," 133-134.

³⁷ Russell, "The Ethics of War," 136.

As a parallel to the two categories of war already tackled, wars of colonization and wars of principle are justified because they are believed to lead humanity to progress. Through colonization, civilization spread throughout the globe due to the conquest of civilized countries. It eliminated the race of inferior ones and allowed the race of the superior ones to flourish. On the other hand, the Wars of Principle are the same – the battle is against which principle is believed to be of greater good to humanity. Both share the idea that what is left after the war is supposedly the greater and better side – the inferior civilization and principle replaced by those of the victors.³⁸

The third, wars of self-defense, are practically accepted by all nations to be justified, and only those who are radically against all kinds of violence. Amidst the seemingly universal right to wars of self-defense, it must be considered that the right to self-defense is not automatically applicable, especially when all parties involved regard conquest or aggression as their defense to a foreseen threat.³⁹ The problem arises when every nation hides under the banner of defense in its aims of aggression.

Lastly, wars of prestige are those in which their outbreak will immediately be identified as unjustified. In contrast to the previously discussed categories of wars, these kinds of wars are wars with explicit self-serving interests which do not result in providing greater betterment in society. These are wars fueled by the ego of rulers and their ambition for victory and conquest.⁴⁰

A criterion on the justification among these four kinds of wars is their contribution toward progress; nonetheless, amidst these ideas of progress produced by war, Russell still pointed out that the benefit for humanity that wars will attain cannot make up for the great destruction they will inflict.⁴¹ A vast number of young men will die in battle, which will surely cause great suffering to their loved ones. Some will return differently from who they were when they entered the battlefield because the wars have injured them physically,

³⁸ Russell, "The Ethics of War," 134, 136.

³⁹ Slot, "Consistency and Change in Bertrand Russell's Attitude towards War," 22-23.

⁴⁰ Slot, "Consistency and Change in Bertrand Russell's Attitude towards War," 22.

⁴¹ Bertrand Russell, "The War and Non-Resistance: A Rejoinder to Professor Perry," *International Journal of Ethics* 26, no. 1 (1915): 26, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2376733?origin=JSTOR-pdf>.

mentally, or emotionally. Furthermore, those areas that are affected by the wars will surely suffer a great economic catastrophe.⁴² With the existence of war's harsh realities and their increasingly destructive capabilities, Russell could not stand still; thus, he argued for peace and the end of war, which the next section will tackle.

Russell's Shifting Views

Throughout Bertrand Russell's lifetime, his attitude toward war varied and did not remain the same. The events that unfolded in front of his eyes made him see the world differently, possibly altering his disposition on warfare. In the previous discussion, it was already established how Russell was able to differentiate between wars that can be possibly justified and those that cannot. Consequently, it was previously discussed how Russell looked at wars positively in tracing them as rooted in human nature; thus, wars are nothing but natural reactions of humanity. These previously established ideas were only portions of the totality of Russell's outlook on war. In this section, I attempt to cover more ground by addressing the issue of shifting views that Russell has on war by presenting Russell's naturalism, utilitarianism, and pacifism.

In Russell's naturalistic view, as discussed above, war is a natural phenomenon that he argued to be an expression of innate warlike impulses and desires. Russell argues that wars are not a result of an interplay of the pros and cons of their actualization, but spring from impulse and desire, which makes arguments for war's suppression harder.⁴³ Our evaluation of the benefits and harms that can be derived from war can easily be altered. Reason can be suppressed, controlled, or enlightened when presented with sets of data; however, the case is different with humanity's natural inclination. Russell argues that they demand satisfaction, and they will seek expression when attempted to be mitigated through suppression.

Tracing wars in human nature is just the beginning. An expression of a natural inclination may easily be accepted when done in isolation; however, when conducted in societal relations, it could be put into question. With this, the desire and impulse theory of Bertrand Russell is further extended into society, considering how one's

⁴² Russell, "The Ethics of War," 130-131.

⁴³ Russell, *Why Men Fight*, 47.

fulfillment of one's desires and impulses relates to the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of others.

In the course of a shared life in a community, it is an unavoidable experience that the desires of each member would always go hand in hand because there would always be instances where the satisfaction of one desire would result in the dissatisfaction of the other's.⁴⁴ Here, our discussion of Russell's ethics takes a turn where it starts to consider the expression of desires that are not focused on the self but on the whole population. Ethics starts to be an endeavor where one tries to adjust one's desires in order for them to coexist with the desires of others.⁴⁵ In this social point of view, desires are understood as bad when their existence and fulfillment serve as a hindrance to those of others, thus possibly preventing the fulfillment of a greater number of desires.⁴⁶ This then implies a sort of need to unify and harmonize the desires that an individual has with those of the desires of others or the community. This is possible by acting on those desires that would bring the greatest happiness not only to the individual but also to the community.⁴⁷

Russell's views continue to change as new circumstances are unveiled. Consequent to the development of society, modern warfare's destructive capabilities continued to grow. This is evident in the capability to harness nuclear energy, where atomic and hydrogen bombs were created. The application of technological developments in modern warfare has achieved an incomparable destructive power that ensures mutual perils among those involved if there were ever to be a breakout of war. Modern warfare became so catastrophic that in its end, no victor would emerge from the rubble it would cause; thus, this made Russell see the necessity of arguing for pacifism.⁴⁸ He suggests that if "we think the survival of man worthwhile, we must have as our goal the total prevention of large-scale wars."⁴⁹ Moreover, it is also this

⁴⁴ Russell, *Human Society in Ethics and Politics*, 60.

⁴⁵ Bart Schultz, "Bertrand Russell in Ethics and Politics," *Ethics* 102, no. 3 (1992): 603-604. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2381841?origin=JSTOR-pdf>.

⁴⁶ Olaf Stapledon, "Mr. Bertrand Russell's Ethical Beliefs," *International Journal of Ethics* 37, no. 4 (1927): 392, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2377888>.

⁴⁷ Russell, *Human Society in Ethics and Politics*, 62.

⁴⁸ Rosalind Carey, "Peace Profile: Bertrand Russell," *Peace Review* 15, no. 1 (March 2003), 108, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1040265032000059814>.

⁴⁹ Bertrand Russell, "The Danger to Mankind," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 10, no. 1 (1954): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.1954.11453399>.

goal of ending war that led Russell to advocate preventive wars among nations, which he deemed to be a threat to humanity, because he argued that the goal is the survival of life.

Later, with the hopes of preventing war in mind, there were instances where Russell did not remain a full-fledged pacifist. There were instances in which instances made Russell see the need to take drastic actions for peace to continue – the employment of preventive war. This possibility is clear when Russell states that: “My belief in absolute pacifism is limited to the present time and depends upon the destructiveness of air warfare. In other times and other circumstances, I should be prepared to consider gains and losses, and to concede that war might be worthwhile.”⁵⁰ A concrete instance was in 1936 during the Spanish Civil War, where Russell saw that resistance to the rebels would cause lesser harm than submitting to them, and he believed that a government, within its territorial limits, possessed the right to fulfill its interests.⁵¹ With the dangers that nuclear weapons impose upon life, Russell deemed it a necessity to find a way to secure safety and survivability, even if it would result in war. Indeed, the consideration of Russell’s impulse and desire theory and his observation of the horrors of wars made his approach to war more humanitarian; however, the utilitarianism in his ethics remained, which he continued to utilize in scrutinizing warfare.⁵²

An instance where Russell’s pacifism was forgotten can be seen in his advocacy against Germany and the need to stop Germany, even with violent means, when other solutions seemed to fail.⁵³ Nevertheless, Russell still believes that he remains a pacifist, an advocate of peace, in his advocacy. According to Russell, he is still a pacifist and, to quote him, he said, “I am still a pacifist in the sense that I think peace is the most important thing in the world. But I do not think there can be any peace in the world while Hitler prospers.”⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Bertrand Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell Volume II 1914-1944* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), 225.

⁵¹ Slot, “Consistency and Change in Bertrand Russell’s Attitude towards War,” 43.

⁵² Slot, “Consistency and Change in Bertrand Russell’s Attitude towards War,” 46.

⁵³ Slot, “Consistency and Change in Bertrand Russell’s Attitude towards War,” 47.

⁵⁴ Caroline Moorehead. *Bertrand Russell: A Life* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1992), 429.

At the onset of the development and possible spread of the capability to harness nuclear technology, Russell, as a solution, offered the need for a world government or a central authority that has power among nations, especially in their nuclear armaments.⁵⁵ The possession of nuclear weapons gives an advantage against those who do not because it imposes fear with its great destructive capabilities. However, when every powerful nation learns to harness nuclear energy, fear might not be enough to prevent them from waging war against one another. With this, Russell proposes the existence of an international control over the manufacturing of nuclear weapons. This international body hinders the possibility of the outbreak of great nuclear wars and opens the possibility of erasing wars in history, as it will be "the sole repository of the use of atomic energy, that will be a self-perpetuating system."⁵⁶ However, such an aim is not a simple endeavor that each nation could agree upon. I do not aim to expound on matters concerning Russell's idea of world government in this paper; however, in the meantime, I only intend to discuss how preventive warfare was advocated for this aim to be actualized. A hint of this idea of preventive war can be seen in Russell's statement, "if utter and complete disaster is to be avoided, there must never again be a great war, unless it occurs within the next few years."⁵⁷ Indirectly, there is this favor if there will be an incoming war since the ability to utilize nuclear energy is not yet available to various nations and is only limited to the United States; thus, it secures a higher certainty of the United States' victory and the possibility of the United States having larger control in the world.

Other than Germany, Russell was known to have advocated violence or preventive war against the USSR as he perceived them to be a threat to world peace and Western civilization after World War II. Moreover, Russell, as indicated by David Blitz, argued that Russia "had replaced the Nazi Germany as an expansionist, totalitarian regime."⁵⁸ He saw Russia as a threat and, with this, a need to neutralize this threat. Russell's idea of Russia as a threat grew when they dismissed the idea of having international control for the manufacturing,

⁵⁵ Russell, *Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare*, 47.

⁵⁶ Russell, *Has Man a Future*, 24-25.

⁵⁷ Russell, "The Atomic Bomb and the Prevention of War," 19.

⁵⁸ David Blitz, "Did Russell Advocate Preventive Atomic War against the USSR?" *Russell: The Journal of Bertrand Russell Studies* 22, no. 1 (2002): 8, <https://doi.org/10.15173/russell.v22i1.2014>.

distribution, and production of atomic energy and nuclear weapons, which is manifested in the Baruch Plan. This rejection further heightened Russell's fears of a nuclear arms race between the US and Russia once they gain the ability to harness nuclear energy into weaponry.⁵⁹ According to Ray Perkins, Jr., it must be noted that Russell's advocacy for war against Russia is based upon their rejection of the aim of internationalizing the control of the different means of war.⁶⁰

In the progression of our discussion, it may seem as though the development of Russell's thoughts is inconsistent, particularly his pacifism and advocacy of war. However, it must be noted that Russell did not promote himself as an absolute pacifist who opposed all kinds of war. Russell is a non-absolute pacifist who maintains the notion that there are evils in war, which makes its prevention necessary, and that in some cases there are exceptions that need the employment of necessary evils.⁶¹ This is clear in Bertrand Russell's article, *The Future of Pacifism*, where he recognizes the merit of absolute pacifism and non-violence as "the best practical policy" as it appeals to the decency which exists in humanity that prevents the killing of those who do not resist. However, Russell also acknowledges the failure of absolute pacifism when faced with an enemy whose decency is already lost and replaced by ruthlessness.⁶² To offer an alternate view, Russell expounded on the idea of relative pacifism, which is a doctrine that points out that there are only very few wars that possess the merit of fighting because, in some instances, the destructive impacts of wars are greater than what is initially evident in their outbreak. Furthermore, in environments that are constantly plagued by the event of wars, it is hardly possible for civilization to prosper and for the humanity of its occupants to remain. These impacts give sufficient

⁵⁹ Blitz, "Did Russell Advocate Preventive Atomic War against the USSR," 9.

⁶⁰ Ray Perkins, Jr., "Bertrand Russell and Preventive War," *Russell: The Journal of Bertrand Russell Studies* 14, no. 2 (1994): 145, <https://doi.org/10.15173/russell.v14i2.1867>.

⁶¹ David Blitz, "Did Russell Advocate Preventive Atomic War against the USSR?" *Russell: The Journal of Bertrand Russell Studies* 22, no. 1 (2002): 6-7, <https://doi.org/10.15173/russell.v22i1.2014>.

⁶² Bertrand Russell, "The Future of Pacifism," *The American Scholar* 13, no. 1 (1943): 7, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41204635>.

reasons for a relative pacifist to highlight the need to create machinery that would prevent the emergence of great wars.⁶³

In the contrasting views between Russell's advocacy for peace and advocacy for war, what remains constant is his aim of preserving the life of humanity. Both his advocacies revolved around preventing a deemed threat that put life and humankind in great danger. In his seemingly inconsistent views, they all remained consistent in promoting what he believed was for the benefit of all.

In the end, the catastrophic possibilities that an outbreak of war might cause heighten the need to seek the prevention of the outbreak of wars. However, as previously established, Russell traced wars as coming from within our human nature, which demands expression and would tend to be more catastrophic if suppressed. Thus, suppression is not the answer but redirection. Humanity's instinctual part can be shaped and reshaped. Different factors contribute to this change, such as education and society's influences. In addition, an impulse is not limited to a single outlet and can be expressed to other outlets.⁶⁴ This means that warlike impulses can be prevented from actualizing into engagement in wars and be redirected to creative means. Instead of using all the energy in engaging in killing, it is possible to use it in making the lives of others better without making one's life miserable.⁶⁵ Impulses can be satisfied without destroying others.

Conclusion

The different events that unfold in our history require different responses. An apt attitude is needed to make a difference. Bertrand Russell's ambivalence and shifting views are testaments that different circumstances lead to different reactions. Moreover, his standpoints show the importance of making a change in one's convictions, especially when they lead to making a change for the betterment of society.

⁶³ Russell, "The Future of Pacifism," 8.

⁶⁴ Russell, *Why Men Fight*, 21.

⁶⁵ Claudio Giulio Anta, "The Pacifism of Bertrand Russell during the Great War," *History of European Ideas* 48, no. 4 (2022): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2021.1944267>.

In our contemporary society, it is yet unclear whether our progression is toward betterment or not. It may be argued that, after all the developments and technological advancements that we have, problems of the past continue to be unresolved, such as inequality, hunger, and poverty. Furthermore, in the case of conflict among nations, individualization of nations continues to prevail in the face of globalization. There is still a tendency for one nation to wish for the destruction of another, possibly with the aim of either conquest or security. Nonetheless, this still boils down to the continuation of the cycle of destruction in history.

The stories of wars and deaths continue to be written. At some point, this may still be a good thing since there is still someone left to write about these unpleasant realities. On the other hand, this must serve as a call to strive for change. Slowly, the progression of the development of modern warfare is a march toward extinction. One mistake among those with power may annihilate the possibility of life continuing. This paper serves as a reminder of our destructive possibilities but also of a reminder of our possibility to transcend these tendencies toward furthering life. Indeed, Bertrand Russell's ethics on war point toward our humanity's natural inclination toward warfare. We desire war; however, he argues that we can desire more, for life to continue to flourish.

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