

Danny Praet (ed.)

Philosophy of War and Peace



Table of Contents

Preface

Danny Praet & Pascal Vanhoecke 7

In Defence of War: the Bhagavad Gītā

Eva De Clercq 15

‘No country has ever benefited from a protracted war’

China and the Art of War

Bart Dessein 23

Buddhism on War and Peace

Some Thoughts and Examples

Ann Heirman 33

Greek and Roman Philosophers on War and Peace

Danny Praet 47

***Iustum Bellum* and *Jihad* in Medieval Philosophy**

Danny Praet 77

Niccolò Machiavelli

The Logic of Conflict, against the Logic of War

Sonja Lavaert 105

Michel de Montaigne

Philosophy as Inner Struggle

Alexander Roose 121

While Reading Kant's 'Perpetual Peace' <i>Emiliano Acosta & Gertrudis Van de Vijver</i>	131
Kant's Conditions For Peace A Critical Approach <i>Tomas Baum</i>	145
Marxism and the Question of War and Peace <i>Jan Dumolyn</i>	155
On War and Warriors: Friedrich Nietzsche <i>Benjamin Biebuyck</i>	165
State Terror <i>Gie van den Berghe</i>	181
The Memory of Peace <i>Maarten Van Alstein</i>	187
Commemoration <i>Gie van den Berghe</i>	201
Truth Commissions A Philosophical Approach <i>Dietlinde Wouters</i>	205

Michel de Montaigne

Philosophy as inner struggle

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The summer of 1572 started in a marvellous mood: a wedding was to reconcile Catholics and Protestants, who had been brutally opposing each other since the conjuration d'Amboise in 1566. The wedding of the king's sister, Marguerite, and one of the Huguenot leaders, Henri de Navarre brought thousands of catholic and protestant noblemen to the court in Paris. The hopes were high, but the anxiety remained extremely tangible. On the morning of the 22nd of August someone tried to kill the influential, protestant leader Gaspard de Coligny. From that moment on, the beast of violence was released. Protestants hailed for justice, Catholics feared the protestant reaction and planned a pre-emptive strike: the protestant elite was to be eliminated. In the night of the 23rd of August the tocsin was sounded, and hundreds of protestant noblemen were assassinated. The murders and slaughter went on for several days and spread over France. Thousands of Protestants were killed. The panic became an *émeute*, an uncontrolled collective loss of control.

A bit earlier on that year, Michel de Montaigne had left the 'Parlement de Bordeaux', the court of justice where he served, to work in peace and tranquillity in the tower of his domain: he lived a life of leisure, to devote his time to the life of the mind, and perhaps to write a book, similar to the *Discorsi* by Machiavelli or the very popular commonplace-books of his time. But this project collapsed as he was elaborating it. Montaigne depicted this moment in his essays:

Recently I retired to my estates, determined to devote myself as far as I could to spending what little life I have left quietly and privately; it seemed to me then that the greatest favour I could do for my mind was to leave it in total idleness, caring for itself, concerned only with itself, calmly thinking of itself. I hoped it could do that more easily from then on, since the passage of time had grown mature and put on weight. But I find – *Variam semper dant otia mentem* [Idleness always produces fickle changes of mind] – that on the contrary it bolted off like

a runaway horse, taking far more trouble over itself than it ever did over anyone else; it gives birth to so many chimeras and fantastic monstrosities, one after another, without order or fitness, that, so as to contemplate at my ease their oddness and their strangeness, I began to keep record of them, hoping in time to make my mind ashamed of itself. (I, 8, 31)¹

Montaigne became a philosopher, as he had to fight the horrendous hallucinations and monstrous thoughts his mind was generating. He started writing down his thoughts and representations in order to reflect upon them, to control his mind in order to control his emotions and behaviour. His second essay is on sadness. Montaigne starts with the story of old about Psammenitus, a King of Egypt. Defeated and captured, he had to behold the imprisonment of his daughter and the execution of his own son. He did not cry, he remained quiet, while his friends were lamenting. 'But when he saw one of his household friends brought in among the captives, he began to beat his head and show grief'. One could assume, Montaigne speculates, that it was the straw that broke the camel's back. But then again, you have to read the whole story: when the king was asked why he had remained unmoved by the fate of his children, and had cried when seeing his friend dead, he replied: 'only the last of these misfortunes can be expressed by tears, the first two are beyond any means of expression' (I, 2, 8). Montaigne had to process the death of his beloved father and his bosom friend Etienne De La Boétie. He had done his utmost to publish the essays that La Boétie had written and he was determined to publish his short essay *On voluntary slavery*,² he wanted to place it as a chapter amidst his own *Essays*. But Protestants were using this seditious treatise as a pamphlet to fight the legitimacy of the French King. Montaigne abandoned his project and integrated La Boétie's poems in his own book; they formed the 29th chapter of the first edition, and followed the famous chapter on friendship. The chapter on Psammenitus might seem impersonal and not related to Montaigne's biography, but it mirrors Montaigne's own unpronounceable sadness. The first chapters of the *Essays* are Montaigne's search for psychological insight. Montaigne would like to understand his own motives and his own emotions. It is not a coincidence that the chapter 18 'On fear' starts off with Aeneas' panic when he is confronted with the ghost of his deceased wife: '*Obstupui, steteruntque comae, et vox faucibus haesi*' (I, 18, 81). 'I stood dumb with fear; my hair stood on end and my voice stuck in my throat', stammers Aeneas. In order to cope with his emotions, Montaigne is working and composing his essays. He is writing to 'toughen and thicken' (I, 2, 10) his skin.

1 Montaigne (1991).

2 There are many editions, as e.g. Etienne de la Boétie (1993) and (1997).

In 1584 the Flemish humanist Justus Lipsius (1507-1606) published a book that very rapidly became a bestseller: *On constancy in times of public evil*, *De constantia libri duo qui alloquium praecipue continent in publicis malis*. It was reprinted eighteen times in ten years' time, and it was translated into French in 1592.³ Lipsius wrote this book primarily for himself. These were hard times: the Spanish occupation, the religious strife and the plague ravaged the Netherlands. The library of Lipsius was plundered, and he had enough of the insecurity, the clashes of arms, and the intolerance.⁴ At first, he had wanted to leave the country as quickly as possible, but he began to debate for himself whether this was a wise decision. Lipsius dedicated his book to the 'Administrators and the Council and the people of Antwerp'. With his writing, he intended to help everyone who had to endure the excruciating violence and injustice. Naturally, many sought salvage in the Holy Scripture. The Bible was a source of comfort to many. The believer drew on the examples of Job and Christ to find wisdom and vigour in order to firmly accept his destiny.

But in times of religious wars, during which the interpretation of the Bible is heavily discussed, Lipsius preferred to rely on other texts. He wanted his readers to get consolation from philosophy. He hoped readers would derive the strength to defy political catastrophes and personal setbacks through philosophical insights. And so he hoped that the reader would understand that it was unnecessary and even pointless to flee the country and to run away from evil. 'The mind must be changed, not the place; and you should transform yourself into another manner of man, not into another place.'⁵ You have to learn to brace yourself, Lipsius reassured the reader. 'Above all things it befits you to be constant; for by fighting, many man has gotten the victory, but none by fleeing'. And what is constancy? 'Constancy is a right and immovable strength of the mind, neither lifted up nor pressed down with external or casual accidents.'⁶

Constancy follows from reason, because it implies proper judgment and adequate understanding. It has nothing to do with stubbornness or pride. Lipsius describes patience and lowliness of mind as the 'true mother of Constancy'. No one should confuse this with resignation. For Constancy comes from the use of reason. Reason knows the difference between the so-called evil and evil, between the so-called good and what is truly good, between general calamity and personal misery. For those who lament the adversity of their country are often just concerned with their own wellbeing. General disaster usually stirs and disturbs

3 Lagrée (2002).

4 Crouzet (2005).

5 Justus Lipsius, *On Constancy*, I, 3.

6 Justus Lipsius, *On Constancy*, I, 3.

people, not because the loss affects the majority, but because they themselves are part of that majority.

Using a military vocabulary, Lipsius explained how a man can come to steadfastness. Firstly, he has to comprehend how Providence works. Everyone should understand that a great catastrophe is sent by God; is inevitable and determined by fate; is useful and is not as serious as one might think. God had created the world and everything that happens in the world is necessary, since God is *Logos*, Reason.⁷ Therefore reality is rational and insightful. It is essential then to trust God and to follow nature or *Logos*.⁸

In other words, in his neo-stoicism, Lipsius reconciled the Greek Stoa – a pagan pantheism, assuming God coincides with nature and with cosmic energy – with Christian Providence, thus with a monotheism that believes in a personal Divine Providence. Providence is a foreseeing intelligence. In God there is a watchful and continual care, whereby God beholds, searches and knows all things; and ‘knowing them disposes and orders the same by an immutable course unknown to us’.⁹

So the wise man looks upon injustice differently; wars are just like natural disasters and as the changing tides. They belong to nature, they are as natural as the movements of the sun. ‘Everything is constantly changing,’ wrote Montaigne. Lipsius confirmed this, and showed how a wise person can take heart from this knowledge. A storm passes, and after the storm, quiet returns. But just as well no throne remains intact: the so-called ‘Eternal City’ had been buried, burned and flooded for centuries.¹⁰ The same goes for Byzantium, ‘the proud seat of two Empires’. Even Antwerp, ‘the Beauty of cities, in time shall come to nothing’ (Ibidem). But this should not be an excuse for cowardice or faintheartedness: ‘if it is destiny that this weather-beaten ship of your country shall be saved from drowning, it is destiny also that she be aided and defended.’¹¹

Lipsius very much admired Montaigne: ‘the French Thales’. In his turn, Montaigne called Lipsius ‘the most learned man left, a polished and judicious mind’ (II, 12, 652).¹² Montaigne and Lipsius had a lot in common: like Montaigne, Lipsius sought to answer the questions of his time by reverting to ancient philosophy. And like Montaigne, that led him to rediscover Seneca and the Stoics. But they handle the stoic heritage very differently.

7 Bolloré (2011).

8 Justus Lipsius, *On Constancy*, I, 14.

9 Justus Lipsius, *On Constancy*, I, 13.

10 Justus Lipsius, *On Constancy*, I, 16.

11 Justus Lipsius, *On Constancy*, I, 22.

12 Magnien (1996).

Lipsius's title refers to Seneca's *De Constantia Sapientis*, *On the Constancy of the Wise*.¹³ Steadfastness is the prerogative of the wise person who is immune to injustice and insult. He is imperturbable and invulnerable; nothing touches his inner life. Nobody, not even the most brutal tyrant, can destroy or hog the 'inner citadel' of his soul. Seneca gave the example of Stilpo who not only lost all his possessions after the siege of his city, but also lost his daughters. Answering the mean question of Demetrius whether he had lost something, Stilpo said: 'Nothing. All my belongings are with me.'¹⁴ And that was not a pose. The wise man is detached. What really matters is virtue and honesty.

Seneca used the war rhetoric that Lipsius also applied. But unlike Lipsius, Seneca does not refer to Fortuna in this essay, nor did he refer to Destiny or Providence. Steadfastness is primarily related to the way the wise man reacts to violence or to insult, and to how he assesses a situation. Montaigne agreed with this, and therefore he was a more loyal reader of the Stoics than Lipsius: his *Essays* did not address the metaphysical contemplations and the theodicy that made up the core of Lipsius's discourse.

However, Montaigne reconciled Christianity and the stoic tradition in another way. For Seneca, inconstancy seemed like a disease that could be cured. Great effort and the right therapy could make the soul stronger. Montaigne's account sounded less promising: 'we are entirely made of bits and pieces, woven together so diversely and shapelessly that each of them pulls its own way at every moment. And there is as much difference between us and ourselves as there is between us and other people.' (II, 1, 380) He wrote this in the first edition. In the last edition he added a quote from Seneca: '*Magnam rem puta unum hominem agere*' [Let me convince you that it is a hard task to be always the same man]- The distinction is minimal. But still: for Seneca, constancy is a challenging task, whereas Montaigne deemed it ontologically impossible. Inconstancy is part of the human condition: 'Vacillation seems to me to be the most common and blatant defect of our nature' (II, 1, 373). But this does not exempt anyone from the obligation to seek it.

Montaigne and Lipsius were looking for comfort and guidelines and found those in the ancient philosophy rather than in a Christian tradition. In his library, Montaigne had about 65 inscriptions: some were biblical – e.g. '*Per omnia vanitas*'; others were taken from Diogenes Laertius' book on the lives of ancient philosophers, the vast majority referred to ancient philosophy. The idea, to surround oneself with adages and aphorisms, belongs to the humanistic tradition, advocated by Erasmus. It is a habit in ancient Hellenistic schools. The

13 Lagrée (1999).

14 Seneca, *De Constantia Sapientis*, V, 6; Montaigne uses the same example : I, 39, 240; 288.

followers of Epicurus wore a signet ring with a portrait of Epicurus. The picture of Epicurus helped them when they found themselves in a difficult situation. Asking, 'What would Epicurus do?', encouraged them to act as the master. The stoics loved *sententiae*, short formulas which summarized their whole philosophy. 'What is wisdom?', Seneca asked in his letters to Lucilius. And he gave the answer: to always want and always reject the same things.¹⁵ This statement helps his young interlocutor to organize his own thinking but also to act. For Ancient philosophers as for their Renaissance admirers philosophy is much more than theoretical considerations for a handful of specialists. To constantly have the principles of philosophy in front of him, helps Montaigne to behave as a philosopher, i.e. someone who wants his acts to be in accordance with his thoughts. Philosophy is not about an absolute and unchangeable truth. The truth of philosophy lies in the never-ending effort of the aspirant philosopher. The adages and maxims in Montaigne's library testify to his will to be permanently confronted with the shortcomings of his mind, the vanity of human ambitions. These proverbs and mottos are very short but extremely powerful lessons: a man should know his own limits and act accordingly, and persevere. Hence Montaigne reads and studies Seneca. When Seneca is considering 'constancy' he uses terms as 'solidity'. He thinks of Plutarch and Seneca as 'solid' writers (I, 26) and he admits: 'like the Danaïdes he is constantly dipping into their books and then pouring out' (I, 26, 164). He also knows he is not as solid and strong as they are: 'I spill some of it on this paper but next to nothing on to me'. Philosophy is a permanent battle.

There was a lot of Seneca on Montaigne's paper. And many of the chapters of the first edition, such as 'To philosophize is to learn how to die' (I, 20), seemed compilations of excerpts of stoic philosophers. The starting point to chapter 24 'Same design: different outcomes' is Seneca's essay *De Clementia*, the constancy of the princes capable of governing themselves; the generosity of a powerful man who waives the possibility of punishing a wrongdoer.¹⁶ Montaigne cited the story of the emperor Augustus who commands his opponent Cinna to appear before him and confront him with his plans to kill him. Cinna protests and denies having had such a wicked thought. But after a long explanation on politics and treason Augustus sends Cinna away as a free man: Cinna subsequently became a firm friend and the sole heir to all his property (I, 24, 143). Montaigne implicitly compared this anecdote with a recent story that he heard from Jacques Amyot.¹⁷

15 Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius* 20,5.

16 Seneca, *De Clementia*, II, 3.

17 See Schaefer (1990), pp. 263-268 who has pointed to the differences (religious grounds in the case of de

It is about the famous nobleman François de Guise, who had been informed by the queen-mother that Protestants were preparing an attack against him. Like Augustus, de Guise confronted his enemy with these rumours: 'My lord So-and-So, you know well enough what I want you for: your face shows it' (I, 24, 141). And like Augustus, de Guise let him go: 'I would like to show you how much milder is the religion I hold than the one you profess'. But there was a difference: de Guise was killed anyhow. Montaigne comments: 'So vain and worthless is human wisdom: despite all our projects, counsels and precautions, the outcome remains in the possession of Fortune' (I, 24, 143). That said, although Augustus's (or Seneca's) prudence did not prevent de Guise death, de Guise will be remembered as a decent man. But Montaigne used these stories to underline the abomination of the civil wars. He who is condemned to live in permanent suspicion cannot protect himself against an old, dutiful friend who has defected to the enemy: it is hard 'to protect oneself from an enemy who (...) holds his own life cheap' (I, 24, 145). Such a man is 'always master of the life of another man'.¹⁸ To keep calm, to be able to trust, and do well, is a wonderful stoic guideline to which Montaigne wants to be loyal.

Montaigne very much admired the ethos of Seneca. He respected him for his constancy and thought he was trustworthy.¹⁹ Unlike Cicero who asked of his interlocutors and readers courage and constancy which he could not deploy himself, Seneca truly inspired his readers and friends: 'Cicero cannot put heart into you; he has none to give. But Seneca rouses you and inflames you' (II, 31, 811). But surprisingly Montaigne was also inspired by Seneca's counterpart, the sceptic philosopher, Pyrrho:

The philosopher Pyrrho happened to be aboard ship during a mighty storm; to those about him whom he saw most terrified he pointed out an exemplary pig, quite unconcerned with the storm; he encouraged to imitate it. Dare we conclude that the benefit of reason (which we praise so highly and on account of which we esteem ourselves to be lords and masters of all creation) was placed in us for our torment? What use is knowledge if, for its sake, we lose the calm and repose which we would enjoy without it and it makes our condition worse than that of Pyrrho's pig? Intelligence was given us for our greater good: shall we use it to bring about our downfall by fighting against the design of Nature and

Guise; tactics with Augustus; the irony of Montaigne: de Guise is responsible for the massacre at Wassy, etc.) and the « machiavellian » insight of de Montaigne.

18 On the patience and the cold bloodedness of fanatics, see Roose (2016).

19 Montaigne here defends Seneca, who is often accused of hypocrisy, see Wilson (2015).

the order of the Universe, which require each creature to use its faculties and resources for its advantage? (I, 14, 54; 74)

Montaigne was not so much interested in the differences between Pyrrho of Elis, the Stoic Epictetus and Epicurus. Philosophy aims at the same purpose: the philosopher wants tranquillity, peace of mind, imperturbability. Therefore the aspirant philosopher has to change his life, to convert to a life of true wisdom.

This conversion, though, should not be a sudden burst of good intentions and lofty deeds, because every one is capable of those (II, 29, 705; 829). It is much more important how one acts in daily life. A true philosopher tries to live in accordance to his teachings. Pyrrho did so in a consistent, almost inhuman way. Starting from the basic ignorance of man, everything was indifferent to him. Montaigne recounted this anecdote to explain this point: constancy is not a virtue, if it is not connected to consistent behaviour. But that behaviour should originate from moral insight. The stubbornness with which the French Catholic Balthazar Gérard (II, 29, 'On virtue') plotted the religious-political murder of William of Orange and then underwent his horrible verdict is not a conquest over the passions, but a continuation of hatred. For true virtue implies overcoming one's own passions (II, 11), without hope for fame or for profit, without fear or habituation (I, 37,). The sect of the Assassins, the Islamic, very pious murderers who thought 'that the surest way to merit paradise is to kill someone of an opposing religion' (II, 29, 806) was not a group of wise stoics.

Admittedly, the whole ideal had something military to it. Montaigne constantly underlined the necessary preparedness to fight every day. Take the essay 'On the armour of the Parthians'. In this short, boring collection of facts, Montaigne seemed to regret the receding vigilance of the aristocracy (II, 9, 454). He referred more often to the decline of the military, virile values that he perceived in his time. These remarks undoubtedly had to do with his desire to be taken seriously, as a nobleman, an author, a diplomat. Writing and reading did not suit his newly acquired noble status, while writing on the military exploits and the utility or disadvantage of a harness seemed to fit better.

But there is more: the reference to Montaigne's father changes the gist. Pierre de Montaigne fought in Italy, in a regular army, subjected to military discipline, against a foreign enemy (*hostes*). The civil wars Montaigne had to endure were of a totally different nature. Frenchmen were fighting a secretive, cruel war against other Frenchmen (*inimicus*), because of religious dogmas. 'On the armour of the Parthians' outlined the moral, political and societal decay by comparison with the ancients. The stories of demanding Roman generals and Spartan soldiers

revolve around Montaigne's obsession with the personal, daily training necessary to survive in times of political disarray, moral distress and hardship.

Civil wars fought for religious faith not only changed the interpretations of warfare, but also altered the focus of the struggle. Never wanting to flee their responsibilities, Montaigne and Lipsius had to seek new sources of valuable ideas. They experienced how civil war made struggle into an internal fight, against a different enemy: the opponent belonged to the same country, and followed the same traditions. Moreover, this peculiar contest concerned the inner dealings with adversity and strife. Montaigne and Lipsius turned to philosophy – and ancient philosophy in particular – to find useful suggestions on how to bring about constancy. In doing so, they showed the limitations that Christian faith had to offer them, although they both – each in their own way – did reconcile their philosophical perspectives with the Christian tradition.

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