



# International Philosophers for Peace 2007 Conference Papers

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## Philosophical Reflections as we enter the Fifth Year of the War with Iraq

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### Introduction

I would like to use this session to initiate an informal consideration of what we, as both philosophers, and Philosophers committed to Peace ought to be doing as we go forward from this point, regarding the current war. I am sure I am not the only one present who is bewildered by what can be done, at this point. I am sure that we have reasoned, written letters to the editors of newspapers, written to and visited Congress People, participated in demonstrations, gone to jail and served community service, at least. But these do not seem to have worked. While of course Aristotle is the first of our predecessors to remind us that we do not do the right thing because it works, but rather because it is the right thing to do, I am anxious for us as colleagues to consider if there is something else that might be done that would be effectual.

The striking thing about trying to gather my thoughts about the current state of the war engaged in by the US is how difficult I found it to be to say anything at all. We are well into the fifth year of this overt conflict, now longer than World War II and there is no end in sight. As philosophers it seems that there are several things we can say, or should be able to say, dependent upon what we take philosophy to be. But this particular historical point in time creates a unique situation (as perhaps all are) where it really seems that the role of the philosopher may have become tragically obsolete.

Yet, many ideas of meta-philosophy seem to require that particularly as philosophers for peace, we should have some major work to do regarding this war. Yet, I keep coming up empty on the clarity of what we should be doing. So I decided to examine some of the customary jobs of philosophy and examine why each

of these seems to have failed, significantly, given this war, at this time. I can remember that the founder of IPPNO, John Somerville, had a clear vision that the role of International Philosophers for Peace was that we should 'call things by their right names'. Perhaps that is our final task. Hopefully through this examination I may see where I have gone wrong in my assumptions in the past and may go forward with a new sense of philosophical purpose regarding how to react to the war that we are currently engaged in.

### What is the job of Philosophy?

- I. One answer to the question, "What is the job of philosophy?" is that the job of philosophy is to announce the truth.

This model of philosophy gave great guidance for the actions of philosophers prior to the beginning of this war. Beginning in July of 2002 (eight months prior to the beginning of the war) announcers of truth, including philosophers, but many other non-philosophers both in this country and many others, began the most vigorous campaign to announce the wrongness of entering a war that has ever been attempted. Almost every weekend launched another demonstration or organized march protesting the American aggression in this situation. France, Italy and England are only a few of the other countries who had record numbers of people in the streets voicing their disapproval of the war with Iraq. (I want to stress this, to this audience in particular, because a colleague from Idaho whom I met in Tripoli in September of 2005 registered great surprise when I mentioned this to him.) His surprise was supported by his claim that the media in the central part of the United

States of America did not mention this prior to our entrance into the war. "I thought it was a slam dunk", he said, mirroring the words of one of our more illustrious Presidential advisors. "We never heard that there was any serious or sustained repeated major opposition. Not in the major media coverage..." he insisted.

While I did not encounter this opinion in the circles in which I move on the East Coast, I remember that there were a few voices (none of them Philosophers....) who in the months and weeks prior to the war took on the phrase, "A Three Week War", through which they expressed their belief that it would be a minor blip on the screen of history, owing to the enormous power and economic differences between the two sides, and that the US and allies would achieve a swift victory. This phrase "three week war" was spoken glibly, with great assurance and even, often, enthusiasm for the approaching 'shock and awe' initiation. I could not help but recall the Epic of Gilgamesh, a text I teach to introductory students each semester. This five thousand year old story from the Sumerian culture, considered by most scholars to be the first written narrative, speaks as well of romanticism and glory at the prospect of an approaching battle.

II. A second answer to the question, "What is the job of Philosophy?" is that the job of philosophy is to provide reasoned argumentation.

As philosophers, our best tools in this activity of argumentation are deductive validity and truth. Yet prior to this war there were many arguments presented to support our entry into this conflict, including allegations of weapons of mass destruction, associations with the World Trade Tower bombings, overriding needs for liberation of the Iraqi peoples from an evil leader, and, as has been alluded to earlier, the supposition of the swiftness with which this could all be accomplished. The aerial photographs, the maps, the statistics, the hypotheses about success rates all masqueraded as the assumptions necessary for the derivation of the conclusion that this was the 'right' thing to do. But what philosophers grieved then and grieve now is the assumptions that were not laid bare but rather ignored. Two of these are clearly to be pronounced again and again if we want to remember a commitment to soundness. One is that *the United States was about to embark on a first strike campaign of aggression*

*against a country that had not overtly attacked us first.* Another assumption which was not accounted for in the assumption set of the policy makers is that *the nature of war is organic.*

The first of these assumptions has wrought moral havoc and a legacy of harm for, and mis-trust of, the United States that cannot be corrected. The world is now new in terms how the United States is and will be perceived for all of time. The second suppressed assumption, that the nature of war is organic, is one that I think philosophers have appreciated, and constitutes or trumps any amount of assumptions or evidence designed to morally dignify the initiation of this or any other war. Once begun, the life of war cannot be predicted. It assumes a life of its own.

In and of itself, it is hard to argue that this fact alone is sufficient to define war as something that should not ever be initiated (though I do believe this.) To do so would also be to forbid the possibility of the majority of other benign human institutions such as marriage and pro-creation, for in these cases as well, a decision entails something taking on a life of its own. But in either of these cases the probability of destruction and human degradation are far less expected or assured as are the likelihood of destruction and human degradation in the case of war.

While there may be a few instances of 'limited' or 'contained' conflicts or wars, this possibility is insufficient to support the fatal untruth about the general nature of war, despite the repeated hope of the possibility embodied in such phrases and techniques as 'smart bombs', 'surgical strikes', or 'shock and awe'. By the use of such phrases (and certainly the oxymoron of 'friendly fire' should be included in this list) Americans seem to reveal the sustained collective neurosis of the myth of control over the life of war. But war cannot be controlled or contained. It lives, fuels, nourishes and moves itself once begun. As International Philosophers for the Prevention of Nuclear Omnicide, we are keenly aware of this reality. No doubt our numerous efforts at *prevention* have failed. What then, ought we to do at this point?

III. A third answer to the question, "What is the job of philosophy?" is that it seeks to critically analyze situations.

A careful consideration of the root causes of war is an interesting and good intellectual exercise. I enjoyed

representing IPPNO at the Millennium Forum at the United Nations as part of a committee to discuss just this question. And certainly, as philosophers we have no doubt engaged in and heard a variety of theories about the particularization of this question pertaining to the current conflict. But analyses of the root causes of war shall always remain incomplete unless we acknowledge the necessary feature of decision. Just as Hume could not discern any necessary connection between a cause and an effect, no set of circumstances, reasons, excuses behaviors or evil acts can serve as a necessary connection to the initiation of this war. The cause of war is always a decision. A decision may be justified by providing reasons, or alluding to causes, excuses, erroneous information, and ignorance or vice. In this war all of these played some part. But these did not cause this war. A decision was the cause of this war, and that decision was not made by philosophers.

IV. A fourth answer to the question, "What is the job of philosophy?" may be constructed through examining a collection of several different passages in Plato's writings. This is a difficult response to articulate, but may be considered under the broad umbrella of tenacious care and hope for the other.

References to passages of this sort can be found in "The Crito" with the spine tingling question posed by Socrates to Crito: "Is it ever right to meet injury with injury?", and Crito's sure response, "NO, never, Socrates." It may be discerned further in this same dialogue as the philosopher is portrayed as the expert at committing to right and wrong, as opposed to the "many". It extends unto Plato's dialogue "The Alcibiades" in which the nature of philosophy is portrayed as "care for the soul of the other". And, it is revealed in Plato's famous Seventh Letter, (this is of course clearly Plato now, not Socrates) as he reluctantly but devotedly agrees to labor with Dionysius in the pursuit of philosophy, despite the fact that his experiences have shown that he will probably not succeed against the vice, expediency and political intrigue which are the true values of his potential student.

This I suppose is a key identification that I am making with models of what philosophy is. Just as Plato is weary and disheartened about the value of his work with Dionysius (and indeed, he does fail) he does continue on, regarding the value of the effort, while

holding the demons of failure at bay. But how can this be manifest to us, today, in light of the many failed efforts at preventing the current crisis? I have only a few suggestions, and then I would like us to discuss the matter as a group.

1. We can continue to refuse to accept the inevitability or moral rectitude of this war.

By doing this we will implement John Somerville's call to "call things by their right names."

2. We may continue to doggedly speak our truths to our congressional representatives and the editors of newspapers.

3. We may educate ourselves and our students on the fine points of the meaning of conscientious objection. This is most important in the event that a draft is resumed. I find that this is a gravely misunderstood concept and needs to be clearly explained. Additionally, should a draft be called and a student is notified that he (she) is to report for service, they have an average of ten days in which to prepare their files and arguments for their hearing. Thus, they need to be carefully walked through to process after assistance in laboring with them to learn if in fact they ARE conscientious objectors.

That is about all I can come up with. However, I am thankful and hopeful that others may add to this list. Thank you for your attention.

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