



# A PHILOSOPHY OF WAR

*Posted on February 1, 2023 by Henri Hude*



In the tradition of Sun Tsu and Clausewitz, Henri Hude has just published a fascinating book, *Philosophie de la guerre (Philosophy of War)*, which offers a necessary reflection on what war is today and how to prevent it in the future.

Henri Hude, a graduate of the Ecole Normale Supérieure and holder of a Doctorate in Philosophy, was director of the ethics and law department at the research center of the Saint-Cyr Coëtquidan military academy between 2004 and 2018. He founded the International Society of Military Ethics in Europe and is a senior research fellow at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis. He is here in conversation with Christophe Geffroy of [La Nef](#), through whose kind courtesy we bring you this interview.

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**Christophe Geffroy (CG):** You open your book by evoking the theory of the just war, from which you distance yourself. What is this theory? Is it obsolete today?

**Henri Hude (HH):** The idea of a just war is indispensable, in order to get out of the dilemma between the immorality of war, which is easy to admit, and that of pacifism, which can be demonstrated: if all war were perverse, no defense would be legitimate; it would be a moral duty to submit to the strongest, even the most perverse. But in the complexity of today's world, applying the idea is not so obvious.

The theory of the "just" war can serve as a weapon of legal warfare, justifying any warlike enterprise of the postmodern West. It is then only a matter of separating the idea of "justice" from the idea of the good and to solidarize it with arbitrary individualism (this is the pathological theory of postmodern justice).

**CG:** In the present context, you show that there is an alternative to total war, which you call the "Leviathan." What is this Leviathan and how does it come to be an alternative to total war?

**HH:** Total war, with the progress of armaments, will be more and more equivalent to general annihilation. To survive, it must be prevented. But war is a duel between political wills. If we want to radically prevent war, one solution is to suppress the plurality of political wills. A single world power will do for all peoples what the State does in a single country, according to Hobbes—to be the "Leviathan,"

imposing peace by disarming everyone.



*Henri Hude.*

In the face of present and future danger, disarming means installing a despotism that reduces the majority to total powerlessness, including spiritual, intellectual and moral powerlessness. The total Leviathan is a unique, absolute and unlimited power, spiritual and temporal, over the human race.

**CG:** With this concept of the Leviathan, aren't you afraid of being accused of "conspiracy?"

**HH:** "Conspiracy" is used to designate either political analyses that are judged to be sketchy or delusional; or stimuli that are judged to be capable of triggering submission reflexes. But conspiracy theory has its credentials. Marx practiced a political conspiracy when he analyzed, in his *German Ideology*, the links between systems of ideas and class interests. Nietzsche and Freud looked for ulterior motives in every thought, in every action—this is psychological conspiracy. In Descartes, the method depends on the idea of an Evil Genius "who uses all his industry to deceive me," making man live in a universal illusion. It is the metaphysical conspiracy of "doubt."

**CG:** Is this total war nuclear? And where do nuclear strategies stand today?

**HH:** If war were total, today it would be nuclear. In a total war, all means are used. In nuclear strategy, what cannot change is the general concept of deterrence. But to make war absurd by raising its cost far above the value of any conquest. To make it so that there can only be two defeated parties, and that to want to defeat is equivalent to committing suicide. Between people admitting the preference for life, there can be no nuclear war, except by accident.

But the preference for life depends on the belief in the meaning of life. Postmodern culture, by diminishing this belief, diminishes this preference. If freedom is fulfilled in transgression or perversion, the murder-suicide duality may become desirable. And if freedom refuses objectivity, the worst is to be feared in the appreciation of situations. The balance of terror will give way to the "imbalance of terror."

**CG:** Why can't the Leviathan be the solution to the problem of war?

**HH:** In theory, the Leviathan is a thinkable solution. In practice, it is not the solution, because it cannot deliver on its promise of peace. On the contrary, it is the most certain cause of war. For the Leviathan to

be established in perpetuity would be a miracle, in a universe subject to change. Instead, the Leviathan becomes a personal iron dictatorship subordinating itself, like a disciplined Party, to a terrified oligarchy. It is therefore very unstable, like any extremist regime, never lasting more than two generations. It arouses extreme and irrational opposition, which would then move on to nuclear terrorism.

Such a will to power would not go without a desire for self-destruction. And then, no Leviathan without a culture of impotence destroying the moral strength of the people (and this can be achieved by ruining popular education). But for the Leviathan, to function, must remain rational and powerful. If suicidal, it then becomes contaminated by the idiocies made for the masses. Ceasing to be rational, despising opponents who are more rational than it is, arousing opponents who are even less rational than it is, the Leviathan will fall; and even before its fall, no security is assured.

**CG:** Traumatized by world conflicts, many Europeans see the nation and nationalism as one of the main causes of war; yet you show that it is not the nation as such that is at fault, but the modern nation as modern. Could you explain this to us?

**HH:** War, among humans, is a universal phenomenon in time and space, well before the nation and nationalist cultures. Its primary cause is at the heart of man as man. Insofar as the nation is a human fact, it contains, like everything human, including post-national political structures, a potential for aggression and a need for conflict.

Although war cultures do not produce war, they can intensify it. Modern" culture has "doubt" as its foundation, and "freedom-first" as its keystone. Rooted in distrust and fear, it incorporates egoism and war—whose first law, said Marshal Foch, is "to preserve one's freedom of action." A "modern" nation is animated by this culture. Nationalism is among the modern ideologies; the one that sees in the modern nation the highest realization of Freedom. If this ideology reigns over a large nation, it will not create domineering ambition, but it will unleash it. And if the phenomenon affects several large neighboring nations, the clash between modern imperial nationalisms is inevitable.

The Leviathan does not only erase nations. Absolute security = freedom at zero + man annihilated. Nations, if they detach themselves from modern culture, can block the Leviathan. A non-imperial alliance of nations, animated by an ultramodern culture of peace, of philia: this would be the political solution without the Leviathan.

**CG:** Why, in any current war, do we demonize the enemy with the risk of going towards total war?

**HH:** Postmodern culture hyper-culpabilizes violence and what it wrongly associates with it (strength, energy, power, authority, virility, etc.). War becomes an absolute evil. When postmodern powers deem war necessary, they must then justify it by a more than absolute evil—the demonized enemy.

In any culture, there is a risk of going to war at the extremes of enmity, but the culture of courage inclines to respect for the adversary. "The blood of our enemies is also the blood of men." But the culture of impotence is "the decline of courage."

**CG:** In your book you mention the crisis of representation and sexual liberalization that aims at the control of the masses. Could you explain the mechanism of these two phenomena?

**HH:** There is a crisis of representation when representatives are powerless. Today, free elections remain, but elected representatives no longer control much. The power is elsewhere: the media, the markets, international organizations, treaties preforming the policies to be carried out, judicial power having for criterion an idea of the individualistic and uprooted man. This excludes nationalist, socialist, or conservative decisions, which the majorities often demand, rightly or wrongly.

Faced with stagnation and decline, elected officials lack personal authority, for lack of a new vision and strategy. In a degraded situation, cornered into verbiage, they reap mistrust and contempt, while the demand for justice, lacking direction, does not go beyond sterile protests.

Sexual freedom is the ultimate safeguard against social revolution. It makes the exploited in solidarity with the exploiter. Both think that freedom consists in being a selfish, and the arbitrary individual, who does whatever he wants with his property, the one his body, the other his money. Sexual liberalization is an elitist "biopolitics" aimed at controlling the masses.

**CG:** In order to establish a culture of peace, you attribute a key role to religions, even though many people think that religions are a factor of division and therefore of war. How do you see this role of religions which are themselves very different?

**HH:** The survival of the human race requires peace. Peace requires a culture of peace. Religions have been at war with each other. This is the first reason why secular humanist cultures have supplanted them. And yet, modern humanist culture is a culture of war. More people have died in wars of ideology than in wars of religion. Postmodern culture sinks into the inhuman and favors the Leviathan. The pendulum swings back the other way. The initiative of a culture of peace belongs to religions and wisdoms, if they are capable of being factors of peace.

**CG:** What is needed for religion to be a factor of peace?

**HH:** Taking personal freedom into account. This is the decisive condition for transforming religion into a factor of peace. For we must not deny the obvious. One can fight for religion. When one believes in it, the salvation of the soul or the honor of God are the most important things. If salvation requires a degree of free adherence to the saving truth, religious freedom is encouraged, but it is not a "freedom-first," and it does not express a political utilitarianism indifferent to truth, salvation, and Divinity. Consequently, religion asks less for power than for freedom. It relies more on persuasion than on force. We are thus not in a logic of war.

If religions do not take into account this factor of personal freedom, they are henceforth doomed to destroy themselves for the sole benefit of the Leviathan. They can be all the more easily allied, since they have the Leviathan as their mortal common enemy. They can once again become the nucleus of planetary culture, by becoming, together, the bulwark of human freedom against the Leviathan. This strategic alliance does not exclude conversions and does not imply relativism. But it does require that the natural value of friendship and the priority interest in the mystical dimension of religion be cultivated among all religious people.

**CG:** In what way does secularism, in the sense of the distinction of powers, require the notion of natural law? And in religions, isn't this aspect specific to Christianity?

**HH:** In my opinion, what can be called "secularism" consists less in ideas or laws than in the effective reality of peaceful coexistence, without relativism, in *philia*, between seekers of the Absolute. It is probable that the distinction between temporal and spiritual is more coherent with this religion than with another, but the practical necessity of peaceful coexistence, on pain of neutralization by the Leviathan, is obviously imposed on all of them—and this is enough for all of them, including the less traditionally secular ones, to admit a practical secularism, at least in the sense that I have just said.

If there is philia, there will also be the golden rule, the set of virtues that philia unifies, the admission of basic moral rules. All this, being common to the whole human race, and not only to this or that culture, or civilization, forms a natural morality. This natural law is sufficient for the needs of public order. Philia is only a word if it does not materialize in this friendly justice. Thus, without natural law, there is no philia, and without philia, there is no secularism.

The postmodern West has lost this notion of natural law, but above all it has lost the sense of objective truth, and this is even more serious. The common opinion among us is that we cannot know anything for sure in morality. This is a mistake. Everyone knows what to do to go to war with his neighbor. The causes of war are objective. Elementary morality, as a prohibition of these causes of war, is therefore just as objective. There is a natural law, at least in the Hobbesian sense—the natural law is the law of peace.

**CG:** We reproach Islamism for waging "holy" wars against the West through jihad, but are we not doing the same as the Americans in Iraq in the name of "freedom?"

**HH:** If we were capable of forming true and universal notions, we would recognize that the postmodern West has waged, between 1991 and 2021, several wars, in its eyes "holy" (in relation to its Absolute of Freedom of the Individual), against Muslims considered as disbelievers. The latter are not mistaken. They are only wrong to speak of "crusaders" and "crusades," because our West of today, at least in its spheres of power, has nothing Christian anymore. Can this religion of Freedom, which does not stop fighting against another, claim to be above all religions and wisdoms in order to organize a peaceful coexistence between them? And then, who will be able to do it? This is the question.

**CG:** In what way is the culture of peace a culture of philia?

**HH:** The cultures of the great premodern civilizations put wisdom, or piety, first. Without necessarily excluding freedom; they only give it a secondary value. They are most often cultures of peace, but they dysfunction from a certain degree of freedom that progress makes possible and which they resist. Freedom then prevails, but this modern humanist culture, which puts Freedom first, is a culture of war, by definition, since the first principle of war is to preserve freedom of action. Moreover, it encourages political fanaticism and absolutizes temporal issues.



Philia is part of wisdom and piety, while assuming trust, thus a sufficient degree of freedom, reasonably evolving. The good without freedom cannot work. Neither can freedom without the good. The two are in danger of colliding. What allows for peace and "a new humanistic synthesis," as Benedict XVI said, is philia, social friendship. This is the main idea of *Fratelli tutti*.

**CG:** In conclusion, you write that only the non-relativistic understanding of religions can prevent the Leviathan from triumphing. Could you explain this to us?

**HH:** The Leviathan cannot establish himself without neutralizing all religions and wisdoms, because they produce fortitude, and it can only dominate through a culture of impotence. To neutralize religions, it has two ways. Either to make them fight each other, to set itself up as an arbiter. Or to subordinate them all to the relativistic principle, which is the basis of the culture of impotence to be introduced in all brains. If religions and wisdoms are not exceptionally stupid, they put both means in check, by refusing both to fight and to merge in a relativist syncretism. The Leviathan is the main common enemy that allows, paradoxically, an understanding that, without it, would not be self-evident.

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**Featured:** *Allegory of War*, by Jan Brueghel the Younger; painted ca. 1640s.

