

# War and Peace

*Rediscovering the development of our worldviews, in the search of what might ensure fewer conflicts\**

by **Georges Kassabgi**

We know a great deal about how the world around us has developed in its diversity. On the other hand, we differ on how it began, remain challenged by its material-to-phenomena transitions, and speculate about its future. It follows that we maintain—for one world—many worldviews: ways of interpreting our perceptions as well as identifying how best to interact with our environment. In the name of peace, nevertheless, we keep striving to find common ground for the human race—brotherhood, family, nation, cultural roots, a vision, a mission—but each attempt toward unity, so far, seems to require a high price before fulfilling humankind's neighborly aspirations. Shouldn't we first better understand what underlies human behavior and thus deal with potential negatives without creating problems of another sort? Destructive wars, whether conventional or asymmetrical or terror-aiming, have not been eliminated, and peace remains an elusive objective. Despite denials: Each worldview is right... up to a point.

The two beacon-like worldviews are: (a) the abstract-fascinated which claims insights into the mysterious, considers spirituality as a distinct feature created along the timeline, has roots in ancient philosophy and religions, and assures us life has a purpose; and (b) the concrete-focused which relies on scientific empiricism, and is able to show that *all* is (or emerges from) matter with its physical laws, evolution by natural selection, and chance. Most people like to think that their worldview is unique in at least one respect, but in all likelihood it belongs to one or other of these two general groups.

The worldviews' initial development depended on one or more assumptions and, in particular, on a convenient starting point. We have: (1) the dawn of civilization; (2) the genetic code; (3) an individual/universal soul; (4) a sacred text; (5) consciousness in the brain; and many more. But why do we disregard what led to these (arbitrary) *practical starting points*? What if we have not yet taken into account *the* most basic material as well as nonmaterial attributes? That is, what could characterize our worldviews as having the common foundational facet that is less variable than what philosophy, religious systems, and the scientific method have been able to provide so far?

At any rate, having imagined or inherited a worldview, we learn, discover, and (sometimes) expand or adjust with hope or in consideration of new aims, but we also tend to reject outsiders' positions, even if their inclusion could, inter alia, partly help in the prevention of future conflicts. Is this aversion to change an inherent feature beyond our control? Is it linked to our brain and mental capabilities? Is it the result of one or more chance events in our evolution by natural selection? Or... does it arise from some distant ancestors' assumption, which ended up triggering a hindrance to later generations?

I therefore suggest we investigate/adopt the *earliest conceivable starting point* for both material and nonmaterial constituents; it ought to provide a thread, a rallying symbol, to all existing worldviews. We do not know what generated such “first” moment. It corresponds to a time when elementary particles or energies existed in configurations and densities which may not be fully understandable with our current means (theories on and experiments with sub-atomic particles, quantum mechanics). More precisely, I posit that such relatively more stable foundation encompasses the material-bound as well as the nonmaterial-bound primal interactions. The latter are the bearers of what it takes to develop, through infinite combinations, entities such as spirit, intellect, consciousness, feelings and, more generally, life’s non-materiality. These additional primal interactions exist in a yet-to-be-studied *integration* with the former, i.e. the basic material primal interactions scientists and many others currently agree on (gravity, electromagnetism, weak and strong nuclear) when they talk about atoms and their components, universal constants, and related physical laws...as well as most of what we perceive as physical/material around us. The reference to a *practical starting point* remains important and might indeed be decided upon on a case by case basis.

In my essay, *What gave you that idea?* (2012), I have introduced *starting points* and *material integrated with nonmaterial at the most elementary level* as “inputs” to current research work dedicated to our individual and societal well-being. They might enlighten (or bring some harmony to) our disparate ways of discussing origins of life on Earth and other questions; for instance, whether or not evil is part of human nature. And I emphasized that constructive results will be achievable *only* with multidisciplinary research projects followed by an across-the-globe priority toward better understanding—education—for all. It could increase, in certain cases, the success rate of our efforts in improving health, education, justice, politics, and more.

The well-established schools of thought and worldviews represent an intellectual treasure. It is true that a *practical starting point* is always necessary in a project, an undertaking—we have to start somewhere and, in some cases, we might need more than one depending on the objective—while the *earliest conceivable starting point* is not; adopting and maintaining such an out-of-our-perceptions concept, however, will help keep our faraway connectedness-with-the-world alive in our thoughts and thus have our behavior permeated by it. In the context of war and peace, the revised approach might allow more successful negotiations toward the prevention of conflicts or the avoidance of letting them last too long. Instead of the declarations that “All options are on the table,” or “The use of force is only considered as a last resort,” or “We’ll go to war with reluctance,” we will have the parties to a conflict look back at their own series of events leading to the current situation and talk to each other with an increased understanding of the differences at hand.

Consider, for instance, two nations at war and each side claiming to have evidence that the other started the hostilities. Political leaders organize emergency meetings, propose a series of steps, assign mediators, call on other nations for their support, and declare that their efforts will not only stop that war, but also prevent such a conflict from ever happening again. Why not go further back in time and identify all that, on both sides, contributed to the conflict and thus calm down the inflammatory declarations of the opposing leaders? The suggestion here is *not* that a concern with elementary particles will have an impact. With that *earliest conceivable starting point* well planted early on in our psyche, we would all have learned to look at starting points and assumptions in unselfish terms. In other words, while the first missile shot across the border between two countries may indicate to some observers who started the war, we ought to consider the distant past before any moral judgment is passed—an *invisible* help for the prevention of deadly developments.

Facts around us are in support of a pessimistic prediction when discussing war and peace prospects. And yet, long-term peace has happened. In remote areas on each continent, millennia ago, some locals realized that there is a common ground to all life and mutual respect is more important than any self-serving decision. Peace lasted until subsequent migrations came with greed, forced their way through such isolated and self-sustaining areas, and eventually imposed their practices with a crude emphasis on the obedience to the chief—the one who knows it all. Some of these locations are again, nowadays, peaceful settlements—nobody mentions them. The locals’ ancestors paid a high price while the modern evidence does not tell us the whole story: assumptions made, long-term consequences neglected, and directions later on accepted merely through over a long time. Should we derive from history that war is natural? Or is it peace? Or that war and peace go round and round?

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Let’s step back and have a look at this ancient “war and peace” question in the company of some great thinkers. A recent article by Admiral Renato Ferraro, *Guerra e pace nel pensiero contemporaneo—Alain (Emile-Auguste Chartier) un pacifista va alla guerra (War and Peace in modern thought—Alain, a pacifist goes to the war front)* published by *Rivista Marittima*, May 2012, encouraged me in this renewed search. Ferraro gives us a vivid account of key events as well as what led Alain (1868–1951), a French philosopher, author of thousands of *Propos* (or propositions, essays), and teacher, to volunteer in WWI *despite* his declared pacifism.

The reader of the Ferraro article may be inclined to take the period of Alain’s interactions with his teacher, colleagues, and some of his students as the *practical starting point* for both his pacifism and his volunteering his service to the infantry. But let’s get deeper into Alain’s thinking. And only then clarify his decision-making process.

At the beginning of the twelfth century, the French Neoplatonist philosopher Bernard de Chartres wrote, “We are dwarfs perched on the shoulders of giants. We see more than they were able to see and farther away because of their gigantic stature; we are neither taller, nor is our vision better.” A few centuries later, Isaac Newton (1642–1727) wrote to a colleague at Cambridge University, “If you have seen further than [...] it is by standing upon the shoulders of Giants.” Alain often reminded his contemporaries in one of his pre-WWI *Propos*, “I was busy enough attempting to rediscover what the best minds wanted to say. Every successful attempt at this is a discovery in the deepest sense, since it is the continuation of mankind.” These three quotes are about the knowledge we inherit from our predecessors. Bernard de Chartres and Newton emphasize the higher authority in the transfer of knowledge, with its implication of hierarchy and respect. Alain, in comparison, seems to take to heart the roots and development of man’s intellect.

Alain climbed on the shoulders of many giants—notably Plato, Aristotle, Goethe, and Comte. He told his students that going from the simple to the complex would prove to be a more effective path toward learning accompanied by understanding (compared to learning at an increasing pace and intensity). He recommended that they look at human intellect and spirituality as parts of one interdependent world: “The lower levels are the support for the higher ones. But we need the higher levels to understand the lower ones.” In Alain’s time, this reference to lower levels could not but be limited to our internal organs and fluids. He also assumed that our spirituality—the non-materiality—was to be identified as an integral part of our system (body and mind).

While initially a committed pacifist, he nevertheless volunteered to go to the front in WWI in order, as he put it, “to gain a closer understanding of what [war] means.” At about the time he returned from the WWI front (Verdun), Alain wrote to his friend Elie Halévy, “[...] The more I think about [the war], the more I am persuaded that wars can be avoided by consistently applying small steps toward the resolution of differences in the same manner a husband and his wife can avoid fighting over their disagreements and, more generally, all intense emotions.” A agreed upon common-to-all earliest starting point cannot but help in the maintenance of a non-destructive dialogue.

Later on, in his *Propos* dated September 1927, *Les Vigiles de l'esprit (The Guardians of the mind)*, he wrote, “The war is. The peace is not a given; we ought to construct peace, and hence believe it is possible. I insist on this point: if you do not believe peace is achievable, you will never be able to aim at it, and if you do not aim at it, you will never achieve it.” Alain was then reinvigorated in his pursuit of pacifism amid an alarming increase in war-minded rhetoric across Europe. He warned, “To find out the origins of military power build-up and the consequent reason to go to war is equivalent to preparing peace for tomorrow.”

It therefore seems to me, as a life-long dedicated pacifist who, at age 46, decided to go to the trenches (a decision which deepened his opposition to war), Alain was one of those who lived with humanity as *the* practical starting point; that is, humanity instead of nation, community, or family. His reference was thus a much earlier point in time than what his contemporaries had chosen. The absence, however, of the *earliest conceivable starting point* accepted by all those broadcasting political propositions provided an open door, especially in the five years preceding WWII, for the ones in favor of war to get stronger and, as René Descartes (1596–1650), in his *Discourse on the Method* (1637), wrote that the diversity of our opinions are not the result of intellectual abilities, but “...only because we drive our thoughts along different roads and often do not consider the same things” Alain’s opponents obviously talked about other things and ended, in the particular case, with the upper hand. Of course, this picture is incomplete; the same applies to what was going on within Germany and other neighboring countries where the only starting point was what had happened to them in the past thirty-to-fifty years.

Alain’s basic insight got my attention, though. It inspired me to search for hidden layers: the deepest roots, how do seeds originate, up from their ensembles of subatomic structures and *all* primal interactions—some of which have been the forgotten components in our accepted theories and worldviews.

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I have also been looking, and continue to look, to giants of the past and present, as we all do, or ought to. The legacies of Confucius and the Buddha, the dialogues of Plato, and the teachings of many thinkers; the contributions of physicists, physiologists, and molecular biologists; the discourses of theologians and metaphysicians from paganism to monotheism; great novelists, poets, and dramatists; the close observation of natural phenomena: each has an undeniable interest and validity. I take great advantage of what has been studied and examined, but I am also tampering with conventions, tradition—“playing with fire,” as Alain said—while I climb on both giant *and* small shoulders.

Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) saw the human psyche as a dark, unfathomable maze. He chose as his personal motto *Que sais-je?*—What do I know? His humility in dealing with what may be behind our reality is commendable and worthy of emulation, though we should not be discouraged from entering the labyrinth due to a sense of futility. His question inspires ours; we carry on his legacy of opening our minds to challenges, and looking for a new approach.

Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913), who identified the law of evolution by natural selection independently of Charles Darwin (1809–1882) thought that some of the brain’s capabilities might have been due to a divine intervention. Darwin disagreed: His own view was that organic structures might develop functions in addition to those for which they had originally evolved thanks to natural selection. The adaptability of the human brain is indeed a testament to Darwin’s insight (his starting point was a unicellular organism). More recently, scientists have determined that nerve cells from two species (to be precise, an insect’s nervous system and the human brain) are made up of lookalike building blocks. It follows, according to their report, that the higher quantity of nerve cells in the human brain makes the difference that distinguishes us from the insects. But how did the researchers determine that the manifestations of our non-materiality might not be influenced by more factors than the number of neurons?

In *What Is Life?* (1944) Schrödinger (1887–1961) concluded that “the task is not so much to see what no one has yet seen, but to think what nobody has yet thought about that which everybody sees.”

Albert Einstein (1879–1955): “The only source of knowledge is experience. And imagination is more important than knowledge for knowledge is limited to all we know and understand.”

A physicist of my acquaintance asked (2005): “What if the nonmaterial-bound primal interactions suggested in your essay are the result of the earliest self-organized ensemble (for instance, a cell)? That would sound more credible to all scientists. We would actually welcome the proposal as a useful addition to current thinking in both theoretical and experimental physics research.” But, I argued, at the lowest levels of complexity we haven’t demonstrated *how and when* the auto-organization property emerges. It has only been observed above a certain level of complexity. That’s one precise requirement for upfront multidisciplinary studies (that is, physics, biology, medicine, theology, sociology, psychology, and more), to consider and thus address critical questions: the drive to life, the origins of the law of evolution by natural selection, the infinite variety of forms, the constancy of non-materiality while cells divide and re-generate (are fields emerging out of the integrated nonmaterial primal interactions?), the material/nonmaterial interdependent dynamics (is consciousness in the brain or a network of nerve cells or more likely flesh *and* fields, with the latter extending into the environment?), and more.

A debate with these great thinkers and many others, about the Darwin-versus-Wallace approaches, say, would likely be filled with arguments either pro or con the “new opportunities in spirituality,” “psychoanalytic principles,” and the proposition that “quantity takes care of quality.” With my idea-inputs, we might start the discussion with a question such as: What if we first establish the same earliest conceivable starting point in all worldviews? We could then study and test and improve the hypothesis of additional/integrated nonmaterial-bound interactions, and thus have a common guiding light for all cultures and societies with their distinctive qualities. What may ensue is a more effective approach toward a better understanding of the mind-body problem, and go further.

Such future work with diverse experts might recommend a reinvigorated set of assumptions; maybe, accompanied by more helpful guidelines, with different additional/integrated nonmaterial primal

interactions along a more convincing absence of pre-determined intent, and actually revise their number... from the suggested four (with reference to the essay mentioned earlier in this text; visit [www.ugik.com](http://www.ugik.com) for more information) to a bigger or smaller number. A widely supported (by experts) new approach may be better at inspiring the holders of our many worldviews to embark on a not-yet-taken road along which: we learn to accept the unknown with equanimity; we open-mindedly discuss what is said to be fundamental or axiomatic; we focus on better understanding rather than increasing our possessions; we have disagreements without final judgments; we see evil not as a fundamental part of being human but as a consequence of artificial selections made around our nature; we know when/how to stop; and we acknowledge that we are not supreme beings, but are dependent on the life process on Earth—as is all organic life.

Good and evil: they are perceived as parts of human nature. But is that the whole story? Does evil inevitably mean destruction, armed conflict, wars? Do we not venture into the search for the *whole truth* with an arbitrary practical starting point while neglecting the assumptions thanks to which our thought processes have expanded?

Yes, it is a tall order. Each worldview has embedded in its origins, and as part of its unique development, a different version of our common story with convenient starting points and assumptions along the *same* timeline. But to talk about a long-lasting peace on earth without at least rediscovering—readjusting—at least one of the assumptions in all worldviews will not go far enough. I have argued in this article that this initial correction is at the heart of how opponents will be able to narrow the divide and thus prevent the “clash of worldviews”. To be good to others, to repeat that we are all brothers or somehow connected, to pray or sing together: all that is valuable and right...up to a point.

Isn't it about time to aim at a higher point? I am not suggesting a new worldview. The basic driver here is that all worldviews—as well as other initiatives—could benefit from the adoption of the same “earliest conceivable starting point” (for our only world) while remaining distinct, as they claim to be, with all their adopted considerations—philosophical, religious, and/or scientific.

Let us roll up our sleeves and proceed slowly, with humility.

In advance, I offer thanks for all readers' contributions—whether in resonance with or in resistance to mine.

\* This article is a slightly revised version of the text translated and published in *Rivista Marittima* (September 2013, Rome), the official Italian military navy magazine.