

# Perspectives of war: ancient greece and today

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



“ Everlasting peace is a dream, and not even a pleasant one; and war is a necessary part of God’s arrangement of the world. ” Count Helmuth von Moltke wrote these words in a letter to Dr. J. K. Bluntschli in December of 1880. Von Moltke’s words, spoken from his experience in the Franco-Prussian War, portray an unusual philosophy. Instead of debating on the ethics of war, he speaks of its continuity and necessity to man. His reasoning has inspired an uncommon belief that it is not whether war is right or wrong that holds importance, but its inevitability. War is a perpetual and endless occurrence of strength, dominance, and destruction that is motivated by the debated morality of violence, the destructive instinct of man, and the inevitable acceptance of war. Despite the vast difference in culture and time of the ancient Greeks and that of today’s society, scholars have found that the views of war are still quite similar on both sides, and such is an issue both societies must contend with in order to survive . The Iliad, an epic by Homer that describes the war between the ancient cultures of Greece and the city of Troy, is one such document that helps to provide this insight. The most common and most debated issue of war is the morality of violence. Being an almost expected component of war, it is difficult to advocate war without advocating violence. In The Iliad, violence seems to be a necessary factor for the purpose of the tale: to describe the brutal battle that was the Trojan War. However, violence was still seen as controversial. For example, in Book I, line 187, King Agamemnon says to the war hero Achilles, “ You actually like fighting and war...”, showing that violence and war are not common place pleasures. Thomas Palaima, a professor of classical studies at the University of Austin-Texas, performed a study and found that the views of violence in

soldiers from Vietnam and soldiers from Troy were in fact very similar. In today's society, many scholars believe in the " just-war principles, " a collection of principles that justify whether or not a war is ethical, but many organized religions, such as Christianity, believe violence to be wrong. Such a viewpoint is shared by characters of the Iliad like Briseis, the priestess held captive by Achilles. However, violence becomes moral conditional upon its purpose in religions such as Islam and Judaism. Consequently, scholars today are at odds with the major religions of the world, which have opposing views. Even if it were possible then and now, war cannot be stopped because of the controversy of violence. War also cannot be stopped due to the destructive instinct of man. Albert Einstein once wrote in a letter to Sigmund Freud, that man must have a " lust for hatred and destruction, " which is why he is so easily incited to war. The Ilian character Menelaus wants to wage war with Troy because his wife ran away with a Trojan prince. His brother Agamemnon simply wants to defeat city that has never before been conquered. Even Achilles, said to be half-man, half-god, calls himself a man made for war. According to a paper written by Peter Manicas, " In ancient Greece one could war for booty-slaves, gold, or riches--or one could war to alleviate a scarcity of domestic necessities- timber, iron, or grain--or one could war to ensure the supply of such necessities. And finally, one could go to war to establish a tribute-paying empire. " Looking at the crime rate in present America, one would be hard-pressed to deny this characteristic of mankind even today. As stated by Einstein, man has a destructive instinct that is as natural as breathing, making war an essentially innate part of man. In addition to the morality of violence and man's destructive instinct, the

most important illustration of the endlessness of war in history is its inevitable acceptance by man. Manicas quotes, " the Greeks came to accept war as a natural fact like birth and death about which nothing could be done. " In his letter entitled " Why War? " Sigmund Freud states that man is " another of the painful calamities of life" which must be accepted. By simply accepting war, man would be accepting that it is neither right nor wrong. In Book XII of the Iliad, lines 374-381, Sarpedon, a defender of Troy, tells one of his comrades that he wishes he could escape the war, but the battle was going to happen anyway, so he might as well fight for glory and Troy. As Freud predicted, mankind need not worry about the ethics of war, only its eventual acceptance. Such a perspective has obviously been noted both in ancient Greece and today's society. In conclusion, the issue of war and its inescapability has been dealt with by both the classical culture of ancient Greece, as portrayed in the epic The Iliad, and the culture of the more contemporary generations. Both societies have determined that war will continue until the end of human existence, when its only motivation is gone. In ancient Greece and the present time, war was and is a perpetual and continuous occurrence of strength, dominance, and destruction driven by the human condition and insured by the debated morality of violence, the destructive instinct of man, and the inevitable acceptance of war. Indeed, Helmuth von Moltke was right. " Everlasting peace" is, and must be, a dream because everlasting war is a reality. Works Cited Manicas, Peter T. " War, Stasis, and Greek Political Thought." Comparative Studies in Society and History, Vol. 2. Comparative Studies in Society and History. October 1982. University of Hawai'i at Manoa. 17 pp. 20 September 2008. [http://www.](http://www.https://assignbuster.com/perspectives-of-war-ancient-greece-and-today/)

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