

(in parenthesis)

This worksheet focuses on a pamphlet entry by **G.E.M. Anscombe, Mr Truman's Degree**. In it she defends her objection to American president, Harry Truman, receiving an honorary degree from Oxford University. It is a complex piece of work, which delves into many different issues in ethics and politics.

In the worksheet below, you will find quotations from the text and questions about the quotations. They focus on key claims in the paper and certain arguments given. Students are encouraged to read the original article which is somewhat conversational in tone and quite different to a standard philosophy paper. As such, it is good context for the questions posed below, and for considering different kinds of philosophical writing.

In 1939, on the outbreak of war, the President of the United States asked for assurances from the belligerent nations that civil populations would not be attacked.

In 1945, when the Japanese enemy was known by him to have made two attempts toward a negotiated peace* [* See Appendix.], the President of the United States gave the order for dropping an atom bomb on a Japanese city; three days later a second bomb, of a different type, was dropped on another city. No ultimatum was delivered before the second bomb was dropped.

Set side by side, these events provide enough of a contrast to provoke enquiry. Evidently development has take place; one would like to see its course plotted. It is not, I think, difficult to give an intelligible account:—

(1) The British Government gave President Roosevelt the required assurance, with a reservation which meant "If the Germans do it we shall do it too." You don't promise to

abide by the *Queensbury Rules* even if your opponent abandons them.

(2) The only condition for ending the war was announced to be unconditional surrender. Apart from the "liberation of the subject peoples," the objectives were vague in character. Now the demand for unconditional surrender was mixed up with a determination to make no peace with Hitler's government. In view of the character of Hitler's regime that attitude was very intelligible. Nevertheless some people have doubts about it now. It is suggested that defeat of itself would have resulted in the rapid discredit and downfall of that government. On this I can form no strong opinion. The important question to my mind is whether the intention of making no peace with Hitler's government necessarily entailed the objective of unconditional surrender. If, as may not be impossible, we could have formulated a pretty definite objective, a rough outline of the terms which we were willing to make with Germany, while at the same time indicating that we would not make terms with Hitler's government, then the question of the wisdom of this latter demand seems to me a minor one; but if not, then that settles it. It was the insistence on unconditional surrender that was the root of all evil. The connection between such a demand and the need to use the most ferocious methods of warfare will be obvious. And in itself the proposal of an unlimited objective in war is stupid and barbarous.

(3) The Germans did a good deal of indiscriminate bombing in this country. It is impossible for an uninformed person to know how much, in its first beginnings, was due to indifference on the part of pilots to using their loads only on military targets, and how much to actual policy on the part of those who sent them. Nor do I know what we were doing at the same time. But certainly anyone would have been stupid who had thought in 1939 that there would not be such bombing, developing into definite raids on cities.

(4) For some time before war broke out, and more intensely afterwards, there was propaganda in this country

on the subject of the "indivisibility" of modern war. The civilian population, we were told, is really as much combatant as the fighting forces. The military strength of a nation includes its whole economic and social strength. Therefore the distinction between the people engaged in prosecuting the war and the population at large is unreal. There is no such thing as a non-participator; you cannot buy a postage stamp or any taxed article, or grow a potato or cook a meal, without contributing to the "war effort." War indeed is a "ghastly evil," but once it has broken out no one can "contract out" of it. "Wrong" indeed must be being done if war is waged, but you cannot help being involved in it. There was a doctrine of "collective responsibility" with a lugubriously elevated moral tone about it. The upshot was that it was senseless to draw any line between legitimate and illegitimate objects of attack.—Thus the court chaplains of democracy. I am not sure how children and the aged fitted into this story: probably they cheered the soldiers and munitions workers up.

(5) The Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour and there was war between America and Japan. Some American (Republican) historians now claim that the acknowledged fact that the American Government knew an attack was impending some hours before it occurred, but did not alert the people in local command, can only be explained by a purpose of arousing the passions of American people. However that may be, those passions were suitably aroused and the war was entered on with the same vague and hence limitless objectives; and once more unconditional surrender was the only condition on which the war was going to end.

(6) Then came the great change: we adopted the system of "area bombing" as oppose to "target bombing." This differed from even big raids on cities, such as had previously taken place in the course of the war, by being far more extensive and devastating and much less random; the whole of a city area would be systematically plotted out and dotted with bombs. "Attila was a Sissy,"

as the *Chicago Tribune* headed an article on this subject.

(7) In 1945, at the Postdam conference in July, Stalin informed the American and British statesmen that he had received two requests from the Japanese to act as a mediator with a view to ending the war. He had refused. The Allies agreed on the “general principle”—marvellous phrase!—of using the new type of weapon that the Americans now possessed. The Japanese were given a chance in the form of the Potsdam Declaration, calling for unconditional surrender in face of overwhelming force soon to be arrayed against them. The historian of the Survey of International Affairs considers that this phrase was rendered meaningless by the statement of a series of terms; but of these the ones incorporating the Allies’ demands were mostly of so vague and sweeping a nature as to be rather a declaration of what unconditional surrender would be like than to constitute conditions. It seems to be generally agreed that the Japanese were desperate enough to have accepted the Declaration but for their loyalty to their Emperor: the “terms” would certainly have permitted the Allies to get rid of him if they chose. The Japanese refused the Declaration. In consequence, the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The decision to use them on people was Mr. Truman’s.

For Discussion:

— In giving her view of the events leading up to the bombing of Japan, Anscombe makes a number of interesting points. Do you think it is right to think of the civilian population as necessarily part of the war effort? And if so, what culpability do you think the civilian population has for the actions and consequences of war?

— On the basis of what she says above, why do you think she focuses on unconditional surrender as so devastating in its consequences during and after the war?

General quotations and discussion points.

I have long been puzzled by the common cant about President Truman's courage in making this decision. Of course, I know that you can be cowardly without having reason to think you are in danger. But how can you be courageous? Light has come to me lately: the term is an acknowledgement of the truth. Mr. Truman was brave because, and only because, what he did was so bad. But I think the judgement unsound. Given the right circumstances (e.g. that no one whose opinion matters will disapprove), a quite mediocre person can do spectacularly wicked things without thereby becoming impressive.

— Here Anscombe makes two points that courage shouldn't always be linked to doing good; and, that it doesn't take a great person to do something 'spectacularly wicked, but that you don't become impressive just by doing something spectacular. Do you agree?

*"But the people fighting are probably just conscripts! In that case they are just as innocent as anyone else."
"Innocent" here is not a term referring to personal responsibility at all. It means rather "not harming." But the people fighting are "harming," so they can be attacked; but if they surrender they become in this sense innocent and so may not be maltreated or killed. Nor is there room for trying them on a criminal charge; not, indeed, because a man has no personal responsibility for fighting, but because they were not the subjects of the state whose prisoners they are.*

There is an argument which I know from experience it is necessary to forestall at this point, though I think it is visibly captious. It is this: on my theory, would it not follow that a soldier can only be killed when he is actually attacking? Then, e.g., it would be impossible to attack a sleeping camp. The answer is that "what someone is doing" can refer to what he is doing at the moment or to his rôle in a situation. A soldier under

arms is "harming" in the latter sense even if he is asleep. But it is true that the enemy should not be attacked more ferociously than is necessary to put them hors de combat.

— She says that in the context of war, 'innocent' means 'not harming'. Do you agree? And what other meanings of innocent are there, and how do they relate to innocence during war.

The state is not fighting the criminal who is condemned to death. That is why the death penalty is not indispensable. People keep on discussing whether the point of it is deterrence or vengeance; it is neither. Not deterrence, because nobody has proved anything about that, and people think what they think in accordance with their prejudices. And not vengeance, because that's nobody's business. Confusion arises on this subject because the state is said, and correctly said, to punish the criminal, and "punishment" suggests "vengeance."

— Here, Anscombe offers a very quick overview of the death penalty — possible arguments for it and why it is problematic. The treatment is quick; however, do you agree with both her assessment of the motivations for the death penalty, and her dismissal of them?

Protests by people who have not power are a waste of time.

— Do you think this is true? Think, conversely, if protests are ever useful, should the protester already be powerful?

Bibliography

Anscombe G.E.M, (1981) Mr Truman's Degree in *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe*, vol. III, Ethics, Religion and Politics. Blackwell, Oxford.