

Robert Aumann on 'War and Peace' (January 11, 2007)

Professor Robert Aumann, the Nobel Prize winner for Economics in 2005, delivered a lecture on 'War and Peace' at the India Habitat Centre in New Delhi. He said that war is a scourge that has plagued humanity ever since the dawn of civilization. Therefore, more emphasis should be placed on understanding the basic causes for war in general, rather than just trying to resolve specific conflicts. He also gave some game-theoretic insights that may be relevant to understanding some of the basic causes of war. He said that if we want peace, we have to increase the cost of going to war for the other side. If the threshold is lowered by talking peace all the time, the other side is encouraged to go to war. He emphasised that it is a big mistake to say that war is irrational. If war is rational, once we understand that it is, we can at least somehow address the problem. If we simply dismiss it as irrational, we can't address the problem. He then compared war with cancer. He said that there are two approaches to cancer - one is the clinical approach where the modality of treatment is decided based on clinical tests. Each case is treated on its own, using one's best information. The aim here is to cure the disease, or to ameliorate it, in that specific patient. The second approach is that no treatment is given and one just tries to understand what happens in a cancerous cell. One tries to explore if it has anything to do with the DNA or something else. Here one works with mice and not people. One tries to make them sick and not cure them.