

Human Nature and War

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ABSTRACT: *The relationship between war and human nature is one of those abstract and theoretical topics that people rarely talk about explicitly. Assumptions about human nature are more likely to remain implicit in most discussions of war and peace. There is something about human nature that leads to war; many believe that there must be some uncontrollable force that drives people to engage in warfare. For centuries, contrasting philosophical and religious views of human nature have framed this debate. More “scientific” version of this argument focus on psychological and biological impulses or instincts that supposedly lead to aggression and war. Through most realists do not explicitly endorse instinctual theories of war; there are some obvious parallels with their negative view of human nature, especially for classical realists. The opposing view sees war as a culturally learned practice, a form of collective violence rather than a manifestation of any individual level aggressive instinct. This perspective is more consistent with liberalism’s positive assessment of human nature as well as feminist and constructivist perspectives stressing the socially constructed nature of many human behaviors. Though much of this debate has been defined in terms of the familiar nature-or-nurture divide, (the debate over which human behaviors are biologically or instinctually determined as opposed to being socially or culturally conditioned). In the final analysis it might be more useful to think in terms of a combination of nature and nurture.*

I. INTRODUCTION

It is almost impossible to get very far in discussions about the causes of war before someone ventures their opinion that war is just part of “Human nature”. Psychologist Anthony Storr appears to agree to this point: “That man is an aggressive creature will hardly be denied. With the exception of certain rodents, no other vertebrate habitually destroys members of his own species. No other animal takes positive pleasure in the exercise of cruelty upon another of his own kind.” When we say that humans behave like animals in war, this is something of an insult to animals, since there are virtually no members of the animal kingdom who do to their own kind what we do to ours. Humans might indeed be better off if we behaved a bit more like the animals. The question of why human beings systematically prepare for and carry out the large- scale slaughter of members of their own species is perhaps the central question for anyone interested in the human condition and our fate on his planet.

Though Anthony Storr’s indictment is certainly harsh, it seems to be supported by the depressing the statistics of war. By one estimate, there have been only 292 years of peace in the world over the last 5,600 years, and during that time more than 3,500,000,000 people have died in, or as a result of, more than 14,000 wars. This includes not only the obvious military and civilian casualties associated with war, but also deaths from the common consequences of war- disease, famine, and civil violence. Other studies arrive at somewhat different figures, but they do not change the overall picture: war is almost certainly the second leading cause of death in human history. Behind only the diseases and conditions associated with old age. Even though explanations supporting the view of war being part of human nature have fallen out of favor with scholars and academics they remain part of the common wisdom, exactly what it is about human nature that supposedly leads to war varies, and the concept of human nature is itself quite fuzzy and elastic. Some treat human nature in a philosophical or theological sense involving foundational assumptions about human motivation, whereas others approach it from a biological perspective, emphasizing instincts and evolutionary imperatives. For some, the elements human nature that leads is an innate aggressive drive or instinct. Others see war as resulting not from aggression per se, but rather from human greed, irrationality, or group forming tendencies. Whatever the specifics, human nature explanations of war imply, either explicitly or implicitly, the inevitability of war. On the other side of the debate are people who see war as learned behavior, the culmination of the socialization process that encourages us to think about aggression, violence and other social groups in ways that make systematic killing acceptable, even desirable in some situations. War does not come naturally, like sex; it is something people must learn, and must sometimes be force, to do.

In very simplistic terms, disagreements about the relationship between war and human nature are specific examples of the age-old nature- verses- nurture debate over which human behaviors are inevitable reflections of some unchangeable part of the human makeup and which are social creations and practices amenable to alteration.

Aggression and war : Philosophical and theological assumptions about human nature are not susceptible to scientific test or argument; they are simply foundation beliefs that one either accepts or rejects. There have, however, been attempts to trace the origins of human aggression and war to biological and physiological instincts, creating modern or scientific versions of philosophical and theological doctrines. Sigmund Freud, for example argued that people have both a life instinct (Eros) and a death instinct (Thanatos), with aggression, whether it is directed towards oneself in the form of suicide or toward others in the form of violence, resulting from the deep-seated death instinct. Though he would later express doubts about this position, in his civilization and its discontents Freud was clear about his view of human nature: "Men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowment is to be reckoned with a powerful share of aggressiveness manifests itself spontaneously and reveals man as a savage beast." The most coherent and influential attempts to theorize about war in terms of human instincts have been advanced by ethnologists (those engaged in the study of animal behavior). Books such as Desmond Morris's *The Naked Ape*, Lionel Tiger and Robin Fox's *The Imperial Animal*, and Robert Ardrey's *The Territorial Imperative* portray war as a manifestation of an aggressive instinct that humans share with other animals. The instinct is typically defined as a psychologically and biologically predetermined behavioral response to external stimuli. Hibernation, for example, is an instinct in some animals because it is a predetermined behavioral response to change in the weather announcing the coming of winter. Lorenz and Morris distinguish instinctual from learned behaviors by seeing whether the behaviors have biological or physical symptoms sexual arousal provides one example: External stimuli, such as the appearance of an attractive mate, elicit specific physical changes and activate desires to engage in certain behaviors. For Lorenz and Morris, it is significant that aggression and fighting are also accompanied by physiological changes, such as rapid breathing increased blood pressure, accelerated heart rate, higher levels of adrenaline, a cessation of food digestion. These are all indicators of an instinctual response.

Social learning and War: Human nature, by definition, is constant. War, on the other hand, is variable. Some periods in history reveal more frequent and intense wars than others. When we say war is a learned behavior, we do not mean in the narrow sense of classroom instruction. Learning refers to the complex process by which people are socialized that is, how they learn what behaviors are acceptable in what settings. People learn in a variety of ways. One mechanism is observation and imitation. As children grow in any culture, they see how others behave in certain situations and they are likely to behave likewise in similar settings. People are also learned through a process of stimulus and response based on the consequences of a particular behavior. If people are rewarded for a behavior, they are more likely to engage in it. The processes of socialization that shape our behavior are so pervasive and subtle that people are usually not even conscious of what is going on. Many also see a connection between a culture's treatment of aggression and violence in general and war. In this context, it is interesting to look at the subtle and not so subtle messages our culture conveys about violence. War films provide obvious examples. Though images and messages conducive to war are prevalent even in times of peace, in times of war they become dominant in the form of propaganda. How war propaganda portrays the enemy is particularly significant. In his study *Face of the Enemy*, Sam Keen demonstrates that societies at war tend to use very similar visual and rhetorical imagery to portray the enemy as less than human. Whether the picture is a savage brute or, at the most extreme, the depiction of the enemy as an animal or vermin, the prevalence of such imagery, and perhaps the need for it, might tell us something. The process of constructing images of the enemy has been characterized as dehumanization or pseudo- specification, which is the tendency to view members of our own species as if they are not members of our species that is, to falsely divide the human race into different species. Keen and others argue that the process of dehumanization is an almost necessary component of war because as a rule, human beings do not kill other human beings. Before we enter into warfare or genocide, we must first dehumanize those we mean to eliminate. The hostile imagination systematically destroys our natural tendency to identify with others of our species. The purpose of propaganda is to paralyze thought and to condition individuals to act as mass. This dehumanization is particularly important for soldiers who have to do the actual fighting and killing. The process of dehumanization also suggests the importance of culture and socialization for understanding war. It is obvious that inhibition against killing, the social taboos Holmes refers to, can be created. The fact that efforts need to be taken to overcome these taboos suggests there is nothing natural or inevitable about it. The image and ways of thinking that allow or encourage people to do the killing that is part of war are social and cultural artifacts. There is nothing inevitable or biological instinctual about them.

The Curse of Intelligence: Abstract Thought : The presence of an aggressive instinct and the consequence of our ability to produce lethal weapons. Lorenz and those who agree with him see people as animals with instincts; they would also concede that we are probably less instinctual than other creatures because of our intelligence and capacity for abstract, conceptual thought. It is this intelligence that distinguishes us from other creatures and has allowed us to thrive in an evolutionary sense. Paradoxically, it is also our intelligence, our greatest asset that is the root cause of our war problem. It is our intelligence; after all, that provides us with the ability to invent the weapons that place our species in danger. It is also this intelligence that “aids and abets” our innate aggressiveness to produce war as we know it. Not only does our intelligence allow us to think of new ways to kill each other, it allows us to conceive the world in ways that are part of the equation of war. As Lionel Tiger and Robin Fox explain, only an animal with brain enough to think of empires and try to manage them could conceive of war. For Lorenz, Morris, Fox, and Storr, war results from the combination of innate aggressive instinct, the ingenuity that produces artificial weapons, our capacity for conceptual thought, and the divisive consequences of social group formulation. According to Lorenz, we have a form of evolutionary lag or disequilibrium. Human intellectual evolution, reflected in our ability to build increasingly destructive weapons that allows us to kill from greater and greater distances, has outstripped our moral evolution. We are the evolutionary equivalent of bunny rabbits running around with machine guns, amazed at their newfound lethality while lacking the internal devices that stop them from own kind.

Our creativity and intelligence are at the same time humankind’s greatest blessing and curse. The result is gloomy assessments about the fate of humankind. Though Lorenz tries to maintain a cautious optimism that human reason and culture may eventually help control our aggressive instincts, he is usually drawn to more pessimistic conclusion: “An unprejudiced observer from another planet, looking upon man as he is today, in his hand the atom bomb, the product of his intelligence, in his heart the aggressive drive inherited from his anthropoid ancestors, which this same intelligence cannot control, would not prophesy long life for the species.”

II. CONCLUSION

Within this debate about whether war is a biological, instinctual phenomenon or a cultural and social invention there is actually more common ground than might be assumed. We can see the point of convergence in Robin Fox’s admission that war as an instinctual form of aggression does not fallow directly from what he sees as the basic instinctual drive. To say that war is learned behavior is not necessarily a basis for much optimism because we may also conclude that the practical obstacles to unlearning war are insurmountable. Tiger and Fox are led in this direction when they ask: “if we are not by nature violent creatures, why do we seem to inevitably create situations that lead to violence?” after conceding that a substantial element of learning and social conditioning goes into war, they conclude that we are creatures who are by nature easily aroused to violence, we easily learn it, and we are wired to create situations in which the arousal and learning readily take place and in which violence becomes a necessity. Perhaps a better approach is to understand war as a result of instincts and learning. In this view, aspects of human nature certainly can lead to war, but they do not do so on their own. It is a matter of whether those elements of human nature that contribute to war are reinforced or discouraged by learning and socialization.

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