

# Humanity at Hazard: The Etiology of War

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## War and Peace

Human beings are extremely creative at making weapons and war, but persistently inept at achieving lasting peace. Why is this? The aim here is to seek an answer to this troubling question. A provocative insight emerged early in the course of research on the problem: as civilization spread across the world, the number of wars sharply increased. In the 16th century there were 87 wars; and in only the first forty years of the 20th century there were 892. (Fromm 215) This pattern continued during the remainder of the century. In the wars of the entire 20th century “not less than 62 million civilians have perished, nearly 20 million more than the 43 million military personnel killed.” (Hedges 13) In sum, over 100 million people died in the wars of the century past, not to mention the millions more, who were wounded, crippled.

Since the number of wars has increased with the spread of civilization, it appears that society, not our natural humanity, is the source of the problem; and this has been the prevailing view in 20th century social science – until recently, when an opposing view began to develop. Until then the consensus in 20th century science had been that humans at birth are like a blank slate. It held that cultural conditioning writes the contents of human nature upon it. It is true that science also affirms Charles Darwin’s view that humanity evolved out of earlier life forms, most recently out of primate species. We are in fact closely related to chimpanzees. Though we are, of course, radically different from them in many ways. So different are we indeed that in the past 100 years, the science of cultural anthropology taught that humans have entirely transcended their evolutionary heritage, and as a result there remains in our nature no trace of animal instincts.

Is it possible there are characteristics of human nature not yet fully recognized? Finding answers has become urgent. Because of our remarkable creativity in weapons technology, because we have developed a number of ingenious weapons of mass destruction, we are threatened now with the possibility of extinction. In addition, there are complicating factors, seen in the proliferation of nuclear weapons around the world, the steadily expanding world population, and the global warming now in progress. We have reached a critical turning point in our tenure on earth. We must act soon and decisively to avoid disaster.

I take for granted that most of us understand that humanity is decidedly at hazard. I don’t want to take the time to prove to unbelievers that global warming is now clearly evident, that nuclear weapons as well as chemical and biological weapons are proliferating around the world; and that if full scale international war breaks out we may end not only our own lives on planet earth but those of many other species as well. If you reject these claims in the face of the overwhelming evidence that they are facts of life, then surely nothing I can say would change your mind. To be sure, there is evidence of a groundswell of awareness of the gravity of the situation. Scientists,

writers, and journalists have begun to highlight the problem, and even to propose solutions; but action is limited and the time grows short.

## **II. Is It Biology or Culture That Shapes Us**

There are now two opposing schools of thought among social scientists. The prevailing consensus in science since the 1930s had held that though Darwin is correct, humanity evolved out of earlier primate species, but as humans continued to develop under the influence of culture, they transcended all animal instincts or drives. This long dominant school of thought held that human nature was formed entirely by acculturation, by social conditioning. We learned to be human as we grew up in our society. It was culture over biology, nurture over nature. A cultural anthropologist at Columbia University, Franz Boas, founded this school of thought in the 1930s, and he attracted many able students like Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead. Both were capable writers and teachers. Boas's students like these two, carried his views out into the academic world where they took deep root.

However, a contrary line of thought began to develop in science during the 1970s. It held that humans are also animals, and that their evolutionary heritage as primates has left a residue of animal characteristics buried at a deep level in human nature. Humanity had persistently denied this in both religion and science. However, sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists, among others, have begun to explore the possibility that we still contain some animal instincts or genetic instructions buried in our nature. Sociobiology draws on insights from a wide range of disciplines in an attempt to explain both animal and human social behavior. It deals with the evolution of social behavior in both animals and humans. In the past 40 years, many social scientists have contributed to this growing line of thought – E O Wilson and Steven Pinker for example.

In 2002 Pinker published a book with the provocative title, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*. It proved to be a detailed and powerful series of arguments against the long prevailing notion that humans had entirely lost all animal traits. Pinker has taught at both MIT and Harvard. Humans have for centuries regarded themselves as unquestionably distinct from the animal kingdom. The Creator himself said so in his Holy Word: “What is man that thou art mindful of him... Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honor.” There is no mistaking God's will here.

The Christian tradition conditioned this conception indelibly into the minds and hearts of the people of the Western world down through the centuries of its dominance. We can see why this idea was appealing. We are clearly a unique kind of animal. We talk, we write, accumulate knowledge in massive quantities, create religion and art, develop extraordinary technologies, and thereby create wondrously complex cultures. From our beginnings in central Africa, humans

have fanned out over all the earth, and have risen to dominance of it. There is, to be sure, a dark side to our nature.

During the past century, humanity has developed in warfare the habit of dropping bombs indiscriminately on soldiers, civilians, men, women, and children alike. We wipe out whole cities with firebombs or nuclear devices. Humans practice genocide, ethnic cleansing, and torture. They wipe out hundreds of other species by over-exploitation or by spreading toxic chemicals on land, in rivers, and in the sea. With the help of science and technology, we have created weapons of mass destruction (chemical, biological, and nuclear) so wonderfully potent that we can eliminate or gravely cripple all life on the planet, including our own.

### **III. The Practice of Denial**

The people of the Western world had been accustomed for centuries to thinking of themselves as free of animal characteristics, and as a result when Darwin in late 1859 proposed his theory that we were descended from earlier forms of life, most recently from primates, it was shocking and decidedly unwelcome news. So unwelcome was it that many people rejected it, denied it. Many still do. A Pew Research survey revealed, as of 2005, that about 60% of Americans still do not accept the idea of evolution. (Quammen 15)

Science for most of the 20th century also rejected the idea there were animal instincts in us. This consensual conclusion dominated college education until the 1970s when opposing views began to appear in the work of scientists like E O Wilson, who developed a new discipline he called sociobiology. It held that both social order and human nature were formed, not by culture alone, but also by our evolutionary heritage. Wilson received a fiercely hostile response from most of his colleagues. However, when you look closely with an open mind, it is self-evident that we share many drives, traits, and behavior patterns with our evolutionary predecessors, the primates. We are similar to them in our body parts, genes, and molecules. Chimpanzees are our closest relatives. Over 98% of our genes are also present in chimps. The remaining 2% presumably account for our striking success as a species. That 2%, while it has enabled us to dominate the earth, also contains the seeds of destruction by our own hands.

We continue to kill each other repeatedly and in increasingly large numbers, thanks to our ingenious weapon systems. In addition, as a side effect of our remarkable technological achievements we are degrading the environment on which our lives are dependent. So much so that if we do not reverse this degradation, we may well cripple the entire life process on earth. Some of us, both scientists and laymen, have begun to suspect that a major factor in generating these grave problems is the evolutionary heritage within us, the instincts or genetic instructions that continue to motivate us.

Sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists, since the 1970s, have been pressing this conviction, but they continue to be opposed by many of their colleagues. Yet, the sex drive is an instinct plainly evident in both animals and humans. In addition, mammalian groups typically lay claim to a territory, and defend it with their lives. So do humans. Animals establish status hierarchies, and so do humans. Most mammals form groups or herds. Humans do as well. This is not to say there is no difference between animals and humans. The differences are radical. Some humans are capable of high-level rationality and creativity, and many more of communicating in complex languages. They develop cultures in which knowledge and skills accumulate, to be passed along to succeeding generations. However, human nature, with its innumerable assets, also contains this dark component that is moving us toward self-destruction, and it contains significant animal instincts that motivate us at an unconscious level. We must end our denial of these instincts, and become fully conscious of them in order that we may transcend them deliberately, intentionally.

#### **IV. Instinct and Alpha Males**

An instinct is a pattern of behavior shaped by biological necessities such as survival and reproduction; and if we distinguish between open and closed instincts, it will enable us to understand the application of the term to humans. In the case of an open instinct, the pattern of behavior is shaped in part by learning, in part by innate predisposition. In the case of the closed pattern, the instinct alone shapes the behavior. (Ardrey 24) But consider, how is instinctive behavior determined in animals? We observe them in their natural environment, and take note of repetitive behaviors. We do the same with humans. In both cases, we watch them in action. Human groups claim and defend territories. Animals do as well. Choosing and defending a territory is instinctive in humans, as is the drive to defend it; its boundaries are learned by experience. War has had survival value until recently. Each nation had to be prepared to defend itself from attacks by outsiders; but now war raises the possibility of worldwide, catastrophic disaster.

Because of our now radically destructive weaponry, and the enormous resources of complex, industrial societies, many nations are now capable of pursuing warfare with weapons of mass destruction. A worldwide network of terrorists, funded by sympathetic nationals can also carry on sustained hit and run warfare. Our inherited territorial drive is not alone the cause of war, nor is the spread of civilization the sole cause, but both are important factors in making war possible. Other factors also contribute. There is the aggressive drive that is evident in all mammalian species; and it normally has survival value. There is also the drive generated by nationalism, and it motivates humans to fight fiercely to defend their nation's territory. In addition, though we say we find war repugnant, the fact is it has meaning and reward for any population. "Even with its destruction and carnage it can give us what we long for in life. It can give us purpose, meaning, a

reason for living.... War is an enticing elixir. It gives us resolve, a cause. It allows us to be noble.” (Hedges 3)

In mammalian social behavior, a powerful male emerges to dominate each social group. This pattern is also evident in human social behavior. Each nation, each corporation is led chiefly by males who by nature have a strong drive for power, leadership, and control of their group. In any competition for leadership this drive is essential if an individual is to rise to the top of a social order. This in turn points to a key factor that brings the other causes of war into sharp focus: the males who gain leadership positions in the world’s nations. It is these leaders who actually pull the trigger. It is they who, with public relations campaigns, arouse a fighting spirit in the people. Individuals who possess this powerful drive are called alpha males in social science (both animal and human).

Alpha male: what is that exactly? In social animals, the alpha male is the individual who leads, controls, and dominates others. In animals he gains this dominant role primarily because of his fighting ability, which is in large part physical, but appears also to have a psychological component as well. However, in some highly social species like primates and humans, a challenger may employ more indirect methods, such as political alliances, to unseat the leader and replace him. (Ludeman: 5) Typically, human alpha males are ambitious, aggressive, fiercely competitive, confident, strong in their opinions, and decisive; usually bright, difficult, and often unpleasant to work for. “Alphas are both indispensable to progress and potentially hazardous.”(Ludeman: 2) Indeed, “human history is the story of alphas, those indispensable powerhouses who take charge, conquer new worlds, and move heaven and earth to make things happen. Whether heading a band of warriors... leading a team to glory, or steering a giant conglomerate, alphas are hardwired for achievement... Along the way, they inspire awe and admiration – and sometimes fear and trembling.”(Ludeman: 1)

The fact is “the world needs alpha males... At their best, alphas are world beaters. When they are not at their best – when they are unaware, out of balance, or out of control – they create problems.... And when they are at their worst, they go down in flames and drag their coworkers, their families, and their organizations with them.... The alpha upside is limitless, but the downside can be devastating. (Ludeman7-8) The leaders of Enron are a recent prime example of the downside, and there are many similar cases in corporations in the past few years, often in the news. Cheney and Rumsfeld are examples of destructive alpha males in our own government. Most senior corporate executives and a large percentage of middle managers are alpha males. It is clear that while non-alphas contribute a lot to corporate life, those who want to rise into upper-management will have to adopt at least a few of the alpha traits. Beta males are those who emerge as contenders for the dominant role, and they occasionally challenge the alpha male’s leadership. Omega males are the followers. There are also alpha females, and in the past 50 or 60 years a few have emerged into top leadership positions, and have proved to be at least equally effective, often more so. The reason for the alpha female success is found in the difference in

their leadership styles. Like the males, alpha females get angry and impatient, “but they are seldom as belligerent as alpha males. They like to win, and they set aggressive goals for themselves and their teams, but they’re not as intimidating or as authoritarian as their male counterparts. And while they can be fiercely competitive, they’re less likely than alpha males to use ruthless tactics.” (Ludeman: 4)

When alpha males control the resources of a large, industrial society, they may lead their citizens into a sustained war as a way of expanding their sphere of power and influence, or as a means of defending it from the attacks of nations led by other alpha males. The government of each nation in the world is usually made up of one or more alphas. Military and political elites organized by alpha males, supported by the resources of large societies, are a primary factor in the persistence of human warfare. Most wars in modern times have not been caused by aggressive impulses in the population as a whole, but rather by political and military elites led by alpha males.(Fromm 215)

## **V. The Etiology of War**

Though there is a single precipitating cause, war has many contributing causes:1. First, sustained warfare is made possible by developed societies with a substantial store of accumulated food supplies and weapons. It is because of this that as civilization has spread across the earth, the number of wars has increased markedly.2. Human nature gives clear evidence of containing a destructive component that is driving humanity toward extinction; and this drive is powered largely by the animal instincts that are still at work in us at an unconscious level. They are unconscious because we have denied their existence for centuries. It is only in the last 40 years that some scientists have begun to perceive the instincts that still affect our behavior. The territorial instinct comes to sharp focus in the nationalism that flourishes now in many parts of the world. It is a powerful force in most populations, as it generates a kind of religious fervor in defense of the national territory.

A factor we tend to overlook or deny is this: war has meaning and rewards for a people. It unifies the bulk of any population, provides an intense sense of purpose and meaning. Both humans and animals have an aggressive drive in them, and it is necessary for survival. Both will be noticeably aggressive in striving to gain what they need or want to maintain or enhance the quality of their lives. The intensity of aggression varies from individual to individual, from time to time, from situation to situation. Cadres of alpha males are the precipitating cause of war, as most nations are led by these males or, more rarely, by their female equivalents. Corporations are usually led by alpha males, and they can earn enormous profits, especially when aggressive lobbyists implement their aims. For munitions makers, war is desirable. Finally, we should not lose sight of the fact that power has a strong tendency to corrupt those who hold it. Alphas, of

course, are most often in positions of power. There are no doubt many other contributing causes, but those listed appear to be especially significant.

## **V I. Solutions**

Humans have tried several approaches to the prevention of war. During the 20th century, after the invention of nuclear weapons we relied on deterrence as a stopgap measure. Mutual assured destruction, however, is a decidedly unstable arrangement. In addition, we have repeatedly tried arms control. Twice in the century past, we tried world government: the League of Nations after WWI and the United Nations after WWII. But all of these attempts failed to end the frequent eruption of wars all over the world. Let's consider another possible solution. The reason these attempts at making peace failed is owing to the fact they leave untouched the most crucial of war's causes, namely, the actions and ambitions of the alpha males who continue to hold positions of leadership in the nations of the world. If we are to make lasting peace, we will have to find some way of controlling the alphas, some way of allowing their valuable creative drive to find expression, and, at the same time, of checking their lethal potential.

Now if the US Congress had understood the concept and characteristics of the alpha males, if its members had been aware of the alpha downside as well as its strengths, if they then understood that the current administration was led by alpha males like Cheney and Rumsfeld as well as others behind the scenes, as soon as it became clear the administration was gathering more and more power into the Executive branch, the alarm bell would have sounded. They would have moved to impeach the President and Vice President. The motion to impeach would have failed, of course, because the administration had gained almost complete control of all three branches of government. However, if the media also had been actively aware of the typical characteristics of the alpha male, then journalists and commentators would have alerted the public to the threat. If the people as a whole knew about the positive and negative in the nature of alphas, if this was widely and generally understood by them, they would be more likely to listen to the media on this subject. The people in massive numbers could then have pressed for impeachment, knowing the menace of alpha males at their worst.

Non-violent action is an effective way to achieve social or political goals. It is not invariably successful, to be sure, but has often won out in the 20th century. For example, the African-American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s had considerable success in bringing about legislative changes that made separate seats, drinking fountains and schools for African-Americans illegal. There was the 1986 overthrow of Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos. Three years later, the Revolutions of 1989 reinforced the concept, beginning with the victory of Solidarity's opposition in that year's Polish legislative elections, and the so-called Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia. There was also a series of revolutions in mainly post-communist

states in Eastern Europe. One notable failure in 1989 was the non-violent student uprising focused in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. I observed this initially inspiring but ultimately tragic event at first hand while studying in China and moving among its people.

With all this in mind, it is clear that the most effective approach available to end war is to immediately set about informing, first ourselves and then the public at large about the alpha male concept and its characteristics, its significant assets and its disastrous liabilities. This information must be spread as quickly and as widely as possible. We must set about raising the consciousness level of as many members of society as possible, including our own. We must study the work of scientists like E O Wilson, Steven Pinker, and Brian Fogarty, integrate their understanding into our own, and spread it widely in society. It has now become of urgent importance that those of us charged with the task of thinking, writing, and/or speaking about the problems and possibilities of human existence, must set about raising the consciousness of people everywhere of the understanding that has developed on the frontiers of social science – especially in evolutionary psychology and sociobiology. Philosophers, theologians, ministers, writers, and journalists must absorb and spread this awareness. The new disciplines of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology are showing us that humanity has been delusional in thinking it is free of mammalian instincts and patterns of behavior. Together, we must develop a social order rooted in the reality of human nature rather than in denial and delusion, a social order that will make survival possible.

Otherwise, this promising human experiment that has come so far in its development will end. We must frame a philosophy, an ethics, and a social order that recognizes the combination of animal and human that makes up our actual nature. The task is urgent. We cannot continue to travel in the direction we have been traveling. The time grows short. “The rest of human history stands little chance of happening... if this era fails in its task of finding a way to abolish war.” (Dyer 97)

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