

# Human Nature Isn't Inherently Violent

by Alfie Kohn

Peace activists can tell when it's coming. Tipped off by a helpless shrug or a patronizing smile, they brace themselves to hear the phrase once again. "Sure, I'm in favor of stopping the arms race. But aren't you being idealistic? After all, aggression is just" - here it comes - "part of human nature."

Like the animals, "red in tooth and claw," as Tennyson put it human beings are thought to be unavoidably violent creatures. Surveys of adults, undergraduates, and high school students have found that about 60 percent agree with this statement. "Human nature being what it is, there will always be war." It may be part of our society's folk wisdom, but it sets most of the expert's heads to shaking. Take the belief, popularized by Sigmund Freud and animal researcher Konrad Lorenz, that we have within us, naturally and spontaneously, a reservoir of aggressive energy. This force, which builds by itself, must be periodically drained off - by participating in competitive sports, for instance - lest we explode into violence.

It is an appealing model because it is easy to visualize. It is also false. John Paul Scott, professor emeritus at Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio, has written: "All of our present data indicate that fighting behavior among higher mammals, including man, originates in external stimulation and that there is no evidence of spontaneous internal stimulation."

Clearly, many individuals - and whole cultures - manage quite well without behaving aggressively, and there is no evidence of the inexorable build up of pressure this "hydraulic" model would predict.

The theory also predicts that venting aggressive energy should make us less aggressive—an effect known as "catharsis," which follows Aristotle's idea that we can be purged of unpleasant emotions by watching tragic dramas. But one study after another has shown that we are likely to become more violent after watching or participating in such pastimes.

Although the hydraulic model has been discredited, the more general belief in an innate human propensity for violence has not been so easily shaken. Among the arguments

one hears is these: Animals are aggressive and we cannot escape the legacy of our evolutionary ancestors; human history is dominated by takes of war and cruelty, and certain areas of the brain and particular hormones are linked to aggression, proving a biological basis for such behavior.

First, we should be cautious in drawing lessons from other species to explain our own behavior, given the mediating force of culture and our capacity for reflection.

But even animals are not as aggressive as some people think - unless the term “aggression” includes killing to eat. Organized group aggression is rare in other species, and the aggression that does exist is typically a function of the environment in which animals find themselves.

Scientists have discovered that altering animals’ environment, or the way they are reared, can have a profound impact on the level of aggression found in virtually all species. Furthermore, animals cooperate both within and among species far more than many of us may assume on the basis of watching nature documentaries.

When we turn to human history, we find an alarming number of aggressive behaviors, but we do not find reason to believe the problem is innate. Here are some of the points made by critics of biological determinism:

- Even if a given behavior is universal, we cannot automatically conclude that it is part of our biological nature. All known cultures may produce pottery, but that does not mean that there is a gene for pottery-making.
- Aggression is nowhere near universal. Many hunter-gatherer societies in particular are entirely peaceful. And the cultures that are “closer to nature” would be expected to be the most warlike if the proclivity for war were really part of that nature. Just the reverse seems to be true.
- While it is indisputable that wars have been fought, the fact that they seem to dominate our history may say more about how history is presented than about what actually happened.
- Many people have claimed that human nature is aggressive after having lumped together a wide range of emotions and behavior under the label of aggression.

While cannibalism, for example, is sometimes perceived as aggression, it might represent a religious ritual rather than an expression of hostility.

It is true that the presence of some hormones or the stimulation of certain sections of the brain has been experimentally linked with aggression. But after describing these mechanisms in some detail, K.E. Moyer, a physiologist at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh, emphasizes that “aggressive behavior is stimulus-bound. That is, even though the neural system specific to a particular kind of aggression is well activated, the behavior does not occur unless an appropriate target is available (and even then) it can be inhibited.”

Regardless of the evolutionary or neurological factors said to underlie aggression, “biological” simply does not mean “unavoidable.” The fact that people voluntarily fast or remain celibate shows that even hunger and sex drives can be overridden.

All this concerns the matter of aggressiveness in general. The idea that war in particular is biologically determined is even more far-fetched.

To begin with, we tend to make generalizations about the whole species on the basis of our own experience. “People in a highly warlike society are likely to overestimate the propensity toward war in human nature,” says Donald Greenberg, a sociologist at the University of Missouri.

The historical record, according to the Congressional Research Service, shows the United States is one of the most warlike societies on the planet, having intervened militarily around the world more than 150 times since 1850. Within such a society, not surprisingly, the intellectual traditions supporting the view that aggression is more a function of nature than nurture have found a ready audience. The mass media also play a significant role in perpetuating outdated views on violence, according to Jeffrey Goldstein, a psychologist at Temple University.

Because it is relatively easy to describe and makes for a snappier news story, reporters seem to prefer explanations of aggression that invoke biological necessity, he says. An international conference of experts concluded in 1986 that war is not an inevitable part of human nature. When one member tried to convince reporters that this finding was newsworthy, few news organizations in the United States were interested. One reporter told him, “Call us back when you find a gene for war.”

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Leonard Eron, a psychologist at the University of Illinois in Chicago, observes, “TV teaches people that aggressive behavior is normative, that the world around you is a jungle when it is actually not so.” In fact, research at the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School of Communications has shown that the more television an individual watches, the more likely he or she is to believe that “most people would take advantage of you if they got the chance.”

The belief that violence is unavoidable, while disturbing at first glance, actually holds a curious attraction for some people. It also allows individuals to excuse their own acts of aggression by suggesting that they have little choice.

“In order to justify, accept, and live with war, we have created a psychology that makes it inevitable,” says Dr. Bernard Lown, co-chairman of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, which received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985. “It is a rationalization for accepting war as a system of resolving human conflict.”

To understand these explanations for the war-is-inevitable belief is to realize its consequences. Treating any behavior as inevitable sets up a self-fulfilling prophecy: By assuming we are bound to be aggressive, we are more likely to act that way and provide evidence for the assumption. People who believe that humans are naturally aggressive may also be unlikely to oppose particular wars.

The evidence suggests, then, that humans do have a choice with respect to aggression and war. To an extent, such destructiveness is due to the mistaken assumption that we are helpless to control an essentially violent nature.

“We live in a time,” says Lown, “when accepting this as inevitable is no longer possible without courting extinction.”