

## CHAPTER 5

# The Individual Level



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Small arms are the principal weapon of choice in acts of individual aggression.

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*A weapon is an enemy even to its owner.*

—Turkish proverb

Wars require the organized activity of large numbers of people. But even the facts of complex organization and massive numbers do not eliminate the personal involvement and responsibility of individuals. To some degree, individual people acquiesce to war, prepare for it, and often participate in it, either passively (by permitting it to occur) or actively (by providing material assistance or actually doing the fighting). If individuals didn't allow, encourage, or engage in them, wars wouldn't happen. Hence, without denying the importance of other dimensions—which we shall explore in subsequent chapters—our search for the reasons for wars will commence by looking to the inclinations and behavior of individual people.

The preamble to the constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) states that “wars begin in the minds of men” (and, we must add, women, although possibly to a somewhat lesser extent). It takes no great stretch of imagination to charge the human psyche with prime responsibility for the initiation of war.

Former Senator J. William Fulbright emphasized the personal dimension of war making (and, thus, war preventing) when he wrote:

The first, indispensable step toward the realization of a new concept of community in the world is the acquisition of a new dimension of self-understanding. We have got to understand . . . why it is, psychologically and biologically, that men and nations fight; why it is . . . that they always find *something* to fight about.<sup>1</sup>

When we concern ourselves with peace and war, we normally talk about the actions of large social units, often entire countries. But, at least in part, when we say that a social unit “acts” in a particular way, what we really mean is that many individuals within those units act in such a manner. Thus, we say that the state acts, often meaning that the people within it—especially decision makers in the government—act.

First, we focus on the level of the individual person: instinct theory, sociobiology (and evolutionary psychology), Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalysis, and the postulation of innate human depravity. These perspectives, while differing in significant ways, share an emphasis on the role of inborn, biological factors. Then, after considering some criticisms of these “human nature” approaches, we consider a variety of other factors believed to operate at the individual level, all of which involve greater attention to social experiences.

## Aggression, Drives, and Instincts

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Many thinkers have assumed human beings to be instinctively aggressive. A particularly influential version of instinctivist theory has developed around presumed biological traits of the human species. Thus, one of the most influential U.S. textbooks on international relations begins as follows: “The drives to live, to propagate, and to dominate are common to all men.”<sup>2</sup>

According to such notions, human warfare can be traced to our biological heritage, attributable directly to genetic, hormonal, neurobiological, and/or evolutionary mechanisms, including a tendency to form dominance hierarchies, to defend territories, and to behave aggressively toward others. Much emphasis is placed on the existence of comparable behavior patterns among certain animals and the presumption that the behavior of animals reflects underlying principles that hold for the human species as well.

## The Lorenzian Approach

Perhaps the most influential exponent of this perspective was the Nobel Prize-winning Austrian ethologist (student of the biology of animal behavior) Konrad Lorenz. Lorenz helped conceptualize a view of instinctive behavior according to which animals are endowed with certain behaviors, called “fixed action patterns,” whose physical performance is genetically fixed and unvarying from one individual to another. In his book *On Aggression*, Lorenz argued that certain “species preserving” aspects of aggression applied to human beings as well. They include the following:

1. Providing an opportunity for competition within a species, after which the most fit will emerge to produce the next generation
2. Achieving spacing and population control, to minimize the disadvantages of overpopulation
3. Establishing a means whereby the pair bond can be strengthened, as by shared aggression of a mated pair against competitors

Lorenz was not concerned with extolling human aggression but with understanding it. He noted that, in moderate amounts, aggression may well be functional and healthy, but, at the same time, he deplored its occurrence in excess, especially when combined with what he called “militant enthusiasm,” the tendency of people to lose their normal inhibitions against violence when united with others similarly motivated.

Lorenz also emphasized that animals, such as wolves or hawks, that have lethal natural weapons also tend to possess innate inhibitions against employing such weapons against members of the same species. By contrast, animals such as rabbits, doves, or human beings—not naturally equipped with lethal weapons—lack such inhibitions. According to this line of thought, the human condition is especially perilous because while we have developed the ability, by technological means, to kill our fellow humans, quickly, easily, and in great numbers, our biological evolution remains far behind our technological progress. We continue to lack genetically based mechanisms to keep our newfound lethality in check.

The Lorenzian approach, which tends to “extrapolate war from human instinct,” is in some ways a caricature of biological (ethological) views. According to what might be called the *classical ethological approach*, aggression is genetically controlled behavior, such that the actual behavior patterns are rigidly stereotyped, invariant,

and independent of learning. In this perspective, aggression can also emerge spontaneously; that is, individuals have a *need* to discharge this drive by behaving aggressively.

Lorenz suggests that one way to deal with our instinctive penchant for aggression and militant enthusiasm is by rechanneling this biological energy in socially useful (or, at least, nondestructive) forms of competition, such as athletics, the exploration of space, or medical research. Nonetheless, Lorenz is led to a pessimistic assessment of the human future:

An unprejudiced observer from another planet, looking down on 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.<sup>3</sup>

### Is War in Our Genes?

Although biology may well provide valuable insights into the current state of the world, simplistic extrapolations from animal to human can be dangerously misleading. For example, it is no more valid to argue that human beings are naturally murderous because baboons sometimes kill other baboons than it is to conclude that human beings are naturally vegetarians because gorillas exclusively eat plants or that humans can fly because birds have wings.

There is a danger that by accepting war as part of “human nature,” one thereby justifies war itself, in part by diminishing the human responsibility to behave more peacefully. If war is “in our genes,” presumably we cannot act otherwise, so we should not be blamed for what we do; maybe, then, we shouldn’t even bother trying to do anything about our warlike inclinations. At minimum—and perhaps, at its most pernicious—such biological fatalism supports a pessimistic perspective on the human condition, one that provides an excuse for the maintenance of large military forces and leads to profound and possibly lethal distrust of others. There is, indeed, evidence that people who are generally promilitary tend to be disproportionate believers in the doctrine that war is somehow etched in our DNA.

To address (and scientifically to refute) biological determinism, a group of prominent behavioral scientists from 12 nations met in 1986 in Seville, Spain, and agreed on the “Seville Statement,” which has since been endorsed by the American Psychological Association, the American Anthropological Association, and other scholarly organizations. Some excerpts from this statement are as follows:

- It is scientifically incorrect to say that we have inherited a tendency to make war from our animal ancestors. Warfare is a peculiarly human phenomenon and does not occur in other animals.
- It is scientifically incorrect to say that war or any other violent behavior is genetically programmed into our human nature.
- It is scientifically incorrect to say that in the course of human evolution there has been a selection for aggressive behavior more than for other kinds of behavior.

- It is scientifically incorrect to say that humans have a “violent brain.” While we do have a neural apparatus to act violently, there is nothing in our neurophysiology that compels us to.
- It is scientifically incorrect to say that war is caused by “instinct” or any single motivation. The technology of modern war has exaggerated traits associated with violence both in the training of actual combatants and in the preparation of support for war in the general population.
- We conclude that biology does not condemn humanity to war, and that humanity can be freed from the bondage of biological pessimism. . . . The same species . . . [that] invented war is capable of inventing peace.

## Sociobiology and Evolutionary Psychology

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A more sophisticated version of instinctivism is associated with the discipline of sociobiology, whose best-known practitioner has been Edward O. Wilson. The mainstream sociobiological approach, which in the 1990s was somewhat superseded by an even more recent discipline known as evolutionary psychology, differs from instinctivism in that it places new emphasis on evolution as a process rather than a historical event. That is, sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists are particularly concerned with the *adaptive significance* of behavior, or the way in which particular behavior patterns are maintained and promoted in a population because they contribute to the reproductive success of individuals (not species) that possess these traits.

A sociobiological or evolutionary psychological view of human war examines such phenomena as ecological competition (for food, nesting sites, etc.), male-male competition (for dominance in the pecking order and for mates), and the role of kinship patterns in directing aggressive behavior in particular ways. Among many species, for example, males tend to be larger, showier, and more aggressive than females. In addition, biological differences between males and females mean, among other things, that one male can successfully fertilize many females. Sexual differences of this sort, in turn, convey a reproductive payoff (enhanced evolutionary fitness) to individuals—especially males—who succeed in defeating their rivals, whether in symbolic display or outright combat.

Consistent with this theory is the finding that men tend to be more aggressive than women (especially outside the family) and also that men are more likely to be involved in violence of all sorts, including war. Another important tenet of sociobiological theory is the role of genetic relatedness: Individuals who share genes probably will behave benevolently (altruistically) toward each other, because such behavior tends to contribute to the success of genes predisposing toward such behavior; conversely, a low probability of genetic relatedness is likely to be associated with aggressiveness. Therefore, appeals to patriotism often involve what anthropologists call *fictive kinship*, calling on citizens to stand up for the motherland, fatherland, Uncle Sam, “brothers and sisters,” and so forth.

Competition has been defined by Wilson as “the active demand by two or more individuals . . . for a common resource or requirement that is actually or potentially

limiting.”<sup>4</sup> Many studies have pointed to the role of primitive war in gaining access to mates, animal protein, and social prestige, such that warfare among preindustrial or nontechnological peoples, which in the past appeared to be irrational and non-adaptive, is now increasingly seen to possess an internal logic of its own—although not necessarily a logic that is consciously understood by the participants.

Sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists tend to back away from the simplistic “either/or” dichotomy of instinctivism, on the one hand, or social constructionism, on the other hand. It is misleading to ask whether a given behavior is instinctive or learned, since all behavior results from the interaction of genetic potential with experience, both nature and nurture. “In order to be adaptive,” writes Wilson,

it is enough that aggressive patterns be evoked only under certain conditions of stress such as those that might arise during food shortages and periodic high population densities. It also does not matter whether the aggression is wholly innate or is acquired in part or wholly by learning. We are now sophisticated enough to know that the capacity to learn certain behaviors is itself a genetically controlled and therefore evolved trait.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, another important evolutionary perspective considers war to have had a prominent role in the early evolution of the human species. Conceivably, proto-human warrior bands were a major selective force in our own early evolution, with successful groups killing off those that were less successful. Large brains could well have contributed to success in violent intergroup conflict by promoting relatively sophisticated communication, formation of social alliances, and effective use of weapons. Those experiencing such outcomes would presumably have left more descendants, who in turn were likely to possess these favored traits and capacities.

## Freudian and Post-Freudian Psychoanalytic Theory

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Sigmund Freud was the creator of psychoanalysis and in many ways the founder of modern psychiatry. He is particularly noteworthy for his emphasis on the role of the unconscious in human behavior. Freud himself was a pacifist, and he especially deplored what he saw as a vicious, lethal streak among human beings. In his later work, Freud attributed much of humanity’s more “inhumane” behavior to the operation of *Thanatos*, or the death instinct, which he saw as opposed to *Eros*, the life instinct. In a famous letter to Albert Einstein, he noted, “We are led to conclude that this [death] instinct functions in every living being, striving to work its ruin and to reduce life to its primal state of inert matter.”<sup>6</sup> When *Thanatos* is thwarted by *Eros*, its energy is displaced outward onto subjects other than oneself, resulting in aggression between individuals or among groups.

The notion of a death instinct remains associated with Freud’s thought, but he also argued that, regardless of whether *Thanatos* exists within the human psyche or if we are “simply” aggressive by nature, civilization demands that people repress their primitive tendencies toward destructive and aggressive behavior if they are to

live together with a minimum of violent conflict. Parents must provide discipline for their children, society must restrict its citizens, and, ultimately, some form of supranational authority will be necessary to enforce a system of world government over individual states that would otherwise function anarchically. Hence, civilization demands the repression of both Eros and Thanatos, which in turn necessarily produces discontent (and neurosis) among its populace.

Another important Freudian concept especially relevant to war is that of *narcissistic injury*. Narcissism involves infatuation with one's self, and in moderation it is considered a normal stage in personality development. But when the individual associates himself or herself with a larger group, especially with the nation-state, slights or injuries to the group are easy to perceive as injuries to one's self. The resulting "narcissistic rage" may involve an unrelenting compulsion to undo the hurt; in the pursuit of this vengeful "justice," great violence may be self-righteously employed. Many of the most destructive wars in the 20th century were perpetrated by people seeking to retake territory that had been wrested from them by others (e.g., the French yearning to recapture the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine from Germany, which was a major reason for World War I, or the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese, who sought during the Vietnam War to reunite their country). Other wars have been instigated by ethnic groups seeking to secede from a central governmental authority, only to precipitate intervention by armed forces from the nation-state from which they hoped to disconnect (as in Nigeria, Ethiopia, Indonesia, the former Yugoslavia, and Russia).

Like the Lorenzian and (to a lesser extent) the sociobiological and evolutionary psychological approaches, the orthodox Freudian perspective tends to be pessimistic about the prospects for ameliorating, much less eliminating, "this ineradicable defect in human nature." Thus, Freud maintained, for example, that we really shouldn't be disillusioned about atrocities during wartime, because the notion that humankind is fundamentally civilized is itself illusory.

Furthermore, according to Melanie Klein (a prominent follower of Freud), human aggression is ultimately rooted in the earliest "primitive" states of human existence, before there is an ego or a language to modulate, rechannel, or defuse it. Human destructiveness manifests itself, among other things, in the "paranoid-schizoid" anxieties and defenses (such as splitting and projection) initially used by infants to ward off feelings of abandonment—by the mother or other caregivers—and fears of annihilation and disintegration.

According to Kleinian theory, human aggression is implicit even in the womb. It emerges full-blown during the first years of life (when the infant quite literally bites the mother's hand and breast that feed it) and persists throughout the entire life span, either as unconscious sadomasochistic fantasies or overtly in self- and other destructive behaviors. The goal of psychoanalytic therapy from a Kleinian perspective is accordingly to induce the "malignant" (destructive and disowned) parts of the self to become "reintegrated" within a "whole-object" psyche, not to seek in vain to eradicate aggression from either the individual or the human species.

Some students of human behavior have concluded that much human misery, including even the penchant for war itself, derives in part from the consequences of being mistreated as children. It is further argued that many acts of violence toward

children—whether overt, such as beating or sexual abuse, or more subtle, such as severe criticism and belittling by significant others in a child's early environment—have in turn been buttressed by the view that human beings are inherently sinful and depraved. From a more secular perspective, the neo-Kleinian psychoanalytic theorist and pediatrician D. W. Winnicott claimed that with “good enough mothering,” the infant's proclivities toward aggression could be mollified. Conversely, without a nurturing environment, babies and young children who are deprived of maternal love and positive reinforcement are at risk of developing pathological character structures and engaging in destructive behaviors.

Other prominent psychoanalysts have not been as pessimistic as most Kleinians and have in fact rejected the notion of a death drive. Wilhelm Reich, for example, argued that the unprecedented violence and destructiveness unleashed on Europe during the first part of the 20th century were not simply the latest manifestation of the eternal battle between Eros and Thanatos but could instead be better explained in terms of the historical development of character pathologies (“armor”) and socially induced aggression under modern capitalism. And more contemporary schools of psychoanalytic theory and therapy—notably the ego, self, relational, and critical psychologists—have also stressed the roles of environment, culture, social interaction, and socialization in eliciting and reinforcing aggressive and destructive behaviors.

## “Innate Depravity” and “Human Nature”

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Some thoughtful people have long maintained that human beings are innately depraved, nasty, and evil, basing this claim on a loosely argued blend of biology, moral outrage, and, on occasion, theology. Looking over the bloodletting of the English Civil War (1642–1649), Thomas Hobbes concluded that there was “a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire for power after power that ceaseth only in death.”<sup>7</sup> To some extent, Hobbes's pessimism can be traced to a biblical—especially a conservative Christian—tradition that sees human nature as inherently flawed. Suffused with original sin, humans are deemed to be inherently incapable of becoming good. Consider these sentiments from the 16th-century theologian John Calvin, perhaps the most influential advocate of this perspective:

Even infants themselves, as they bring their condemnation into the world with them, are rendered subject to punishment of their own sinfulness. . . . For though they have not yet produced the fruits of their iniquity, yet they have had the seed of it in them. Their whole nature is, as it were, a seed of sin and therefore cannot but be . . . abominable to God.<sup>8</sup>

In Calvinist theology, because of our allegedly innate human sinfulness, we were cast out of the Garden of Eden, doomed to death. We therefore deserve—indeed, we require—to be treated sternly and punished vigorously. In any event, according to this pessimistic Christian view, a true state of personal peace can be achieved only by grace, just as a state of political peace requires the Second Coming of Christ. And until then, war is inevitable.

This attitude is not limited to conservative Christians, however. Another approach, rarely articulated, emphasizes that human beings have not only a capacity for violence but also a deep-seated love of bloodletting, hatred, and destruction.<sup>9</sup> In the 17th century, John Milton wrote that

even if our species were rendered somehow impervious to injury from all outside forces, yet the perverseness of our folly is so bent, that we should never cease hammering out of our own hearts, as it were out of a flint, the seeds and sparkles of new misery to ourselves, till all were in a blaze again.<sup>10</sup>

From this perspective, war is an evil unique to humanity. The influential 20th-century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr argued that it was the “sinful character of man” that necessitated “the balancing of power with power.”<sup>11</sup> The philosophers Spinoza and Kant located the evils of human violence in the fact that our rational faculties are regularly overwhelmed by our irrational and untamed emotions.

This is only a very limited sampling of a widespread notion. Although it is virtually impossible to verify, the idea of innate human weakness and depravity remains popular, especially among the lay public. It has also been particularly influential among those who are sympathetic to military force, if not to war itself. Thus, if human nature is inherently nasty and warlike, we can never have any confidence in morality, law, or anything else to deliver us from war, since these are only frail, artificial institutions constructed by fundamentally flawed human beings. Accordingly, from this perspective, because human nature presumably cannot be changed, the only way to safeguard personal or national security is by recourse to arms.

## Criticisms of Human Nature Theories

The various human nature theories about the reasons for human violence all contain flaws. For example, human beings undoubtedly have the biological capacity to kill one another—proven by the fact that they have often done so. The danger is that such a broad generalization may be useless in analyzing the past or predicting the future. Other, more specific problems in these theories exist as well. For example, consider the following:

1. Although war is a widespread human trait, it is not a universal one; certain cultures, such as the South African Bushmen (or San), the Semai (in Southeast Asia), and the Inuit (in northern North America), apparently never engaged in war, although interpersonal violence was not unknown. Explanations based on human nature should apply to these peoples no less than to others. Although some societies are clearly more war prone than others, there is also no evidence that such differences reflect inherent differences in human nature.

2. Even among war-prone cultures, there have been many years of peace. If human nature caused World War II or the Vietnam War, what about the peace that preceded and followed these wars? If human nature causes war, it must also cause peace—the neutrality of Sweden, the demilitarized U.S.-Canadian border, Gandhi’s

nonviolence, etc. Any explanation that is so broad becomes useless. To paraphrase a military metaphor of Karl von Clausewitz, he who seeks to explain everything explains nothing.

3. Even within war-prone cultures, there have been war resisters, peace advocates, and longtime nonviolent traditions such as the Mennonites and the Quakers; are they less “human,” or less “natural,” than their more violent fellow citizens?

4. The fact that animals behave in certain ways does not necessarily mean that human beings do so; we have the capacity for complex, abstract, and symbolic thought, which gives us the opportunity to reason, to analyze, and to rise above our unpleasant or dangerous inclinations.

5. If war is a result of a fixed human nature, it seems predestined and unavoidable, since we cannot—by definition—behave counter to our own nature. There is a special danger in the belief that war is inevitable, because it is likely to discourage people from seeking to end war and to promote peace. Moreover, it can also serve to *justify* war by making it appear somehow “good” because it is natural.

In all fairness, the above criticisms oversimplify the more sophisticated human nature arguments. Thus, most biologically inclined theorists recognize that genetic factors do not irrevocably commit a person, or a society, to a given course of action. Rather, they create *predispositions* for behaving aggressively or violently when circumstances are appropriate; similarly, nothing in sociobiological or evolutionary psychological thought suggests that such predispositions could not be overridden by religious beliefs, historical circumstances, collective social action, and so on. There is nothing inconsistent with the proponents of such theories suggesting that human beings can say no, even if it seems difficult or feels “unnatural” to their genes, neurons, and/or hormones.

## Human Nature and Genetic Determinism

There is a great difference between a possible genetic *influence* on war-proneness and the doctrine of genetic *determinism*. The former implies the existence of tendencies, likely to be subtle and capable of being overridden, whereas the latter implies rigid, ironclad automatic responses. There may well be genetic and neurobiological influences that human beings, if they are to be peaceful, must overcome or sublimate. But this is not to say that our genes, neurons, and/or hormones predetermine our behavior, condemning us to violence.

As to morality, advocates—and critics—of biologically based arguments should be wary of what the philosopher David Hume first identified—and what was later labeled by the 20th-century British philosopher G. E. Moore—as the *naturalistic fallacy*, the mistaken belief that “*is* implies *ought*.” In other words, whatever insights evolutionary theory and neuroscience might provide regarding how the natural world and the human brain work are distinct from ethical guidance as to what is good. Typhoid is natural; this does not mean that it is good. War may or may not be natural; whether it is good, however, is an entirely different question. In any

event, if typhoid, or war, is to be prevented or cured, we must understand its causation, whether or not we are pleased by what we find.

## Frustration-Aggression

Among explanations for war that do not depend on explicit assumptions about human nature, one of the most influential has been the frustration-aggression hypothesis, which was developed to explain individual aggressiveness as well. According to this theory, first proposed almost 70 years ago by the psychiatrist John Dollard and his colleagues, aggressiveness is produced by frustration, which in turn is defined as “an interference with the occurrence of an instigated goal-response at its proper time in the behavior sequence.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, if a hungry rat is presented with food, after which a glass wall is interposed between the animal and its desire, the rat is likely to become aggressive. A similar thing happens with people who have been seeking something unsuccessfully—food, political freedoms, access to a disputed territory, union with others who practice the same customs—or who have obtained partial success only to be prevented from achieving their ultimate goals.

In its initial formulation, frustration theory was presented rather dogmatically. “The occurrence of aggressive behavior always presupposes the existence of frustration, and contrariwise, the existence of frustration always leads to some form of aggression.”<sup>13</sup> This rigidity led to problems comparable to those encountered with some human nature theories: The argument can become circular if all cases of aggression are defined as revealing preexisting frustration, and vice versa, if any behavior that follows frustration is defined as aggression.

Frustration theory has subsequently been modified to recognize that frustration creates a predisposition or readiness for aggression, by producing an intervening emotional state: anger. In addition, environmental stimuli are necessary for aggression to be produced. Finally, an individual’s learning experiences and society’s expectations exert a powerful influence on the connection between frustration and aggression. Of course, other responses to frustration are also possible—namely, submission, resignation, alienation, withdrawal, avoidance, or even acceptance—but this does not in itself argue against the strength of the frustration-aggression link.

Frustration can also result in resentment, which (like the above responses) may or may not subsequently produce aggressive behavior. Frustration may be especially high when there is a discrepancy between expectations and realities: Bad social conditions, such as poverty or political repression, are made to seem even worse by high expectations that conflict with unpleasant realities. Accordingly, the “revolution of rising expectations,” particularly in the less advanced economies, has been associated with frustration and violence.

Political and military authorities often respond to collective efforts to promote social change with increased repression, but the forceful repression of strongly felt needs (such as the yearning for Palestinian self-determination and, before that, of Zionists for a Jewish state) can in itself be highly frustrating and thereby ultimately increase hostility and aggression. In some cases, frustration finds its outlet in aggressive behavior against others who are not actually the perceived frustrating agent. This is sometimes called displacement, or redirected aggression.

There is another possible twist to the connection between frustration and war: namely, boredom. It has been suggested that war is especially appealing to those whose lives are lacking in excitement and interest. “The absence of delight in daily living,” wrote the historian John Nef, “has helped to leave many lives empty and sterile and so, fair game for any excitement, including the most terrific of worldly excitements, that of war.”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, once a society has elevated military values, has trained men and boys (and, increasingly, women and girls) to be warriors, and has institutionalized and mythologized the war experience, people may be especially prone to be frustrated and bored with peace. Of course, warfare itself actually involves prolonged periods of boredom and monotony. The endless repetition, drill, and “hurry up and wait” behavior that characterize military routine are hardly antidotes for civilian ennui. Military boredom may lead, however, to frustration, which in turn may lead to greater willingness to go to war, if only to “see action” and thereby finally break the suspense.

### Social Learning

Clearly, human beings are strongly influenced by their experiences—those that occur early in development and that also characterize later socialization—as well as society’s norms and expectations. Most psychologists and sociologists maintain that human violence arises in response to experiences, rather than bubbling up out of our genetic constitution. “The important fact,” wrote psychologist John Paul Scott, “is that the chain of causation in every case eventually traces back to the outside. There is no physiological evidence of any spontaneous stimulation for fighting arising within the body.”<sup>15</sup>

Scott has emphasized that individuals are particularly likely to fight if they have fought successfully in the past and that aggression often results from a breakdown in social structures. (It is also noteworthy, on the other hand, that some of the most aggressive societies have been highly structured: Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, for example.)

### Conditioning

One of the most important developments in 20th-century psychology revolved around the phenomenon known as *instrumental* or *operant conditioning*, especially associated with the work of B. F. Skinner. The basic idea is that behavior will be influenced by its consequences for the individual: Certain behaviors tend to be *reinforcing*—that is, they make it more likely that the individual will repeat the previous actions. Some authorities employ the phrase *instrumental aggression* to refer to aggressive behavior that is oriented primarily toward attaining some goal, such as winning a war or recovering territory, rather than causing injury as such.

Conditioning theory applied to human aggressiveness suggests that people will behave aggressively when such behavior leads to reinforcing (i.e., positive) results and, conversely, that the likelihood of aggression will be reduced if it leads to negative results. By extrapolation, members of whole societies can presumably be influenced similarly, making war more probable if their behavior has been positively

reinforced (rewarded) or negatively reinforced (punished). For example, the international aggressiveness of Nazi Germany was positively reinforced during most of the 1930s by the appeasement policies of the West; by contrast, it can be argued that international adventuring on the part of the United States was negatively reinforced by its divisive and ultimately unsuccessful involvement in Southeast Asia (resulting in a subsequent reluctance to commit American ground troops to foreign combat, the so-called Vietnam syndrome). If so, the effects are disputable, since the “Vietnam syndrome” did not inhibit two subsequent U.S.-led invasions of Iraq; moreover, one of the expressed motivations for these military adventures was to “get rid of the Vietnam syndrome, once and for all.”

### Socialization to Aggressiveness

Some societies actively encourage aggressiveness from early childhood. For example, consider the Fulani people of northern Nigeria, among whom most males seek to embody the ideals of “aggressive dominance.” As boys, young Fulani males are taught to beat their cattle to prevent them from wandering off and to fight back unhesitatingly whenever they have been attacked. If they refrain from retaliating, they are mocked as cowards. They show virtually no emotion when struck with sticks during increasingly serious fights, and by the time they are young men, the Fulani are proud of their battle scars. Not surprisingly, they are also prone to personal fighting as well as warfare.

Mark May, an influential social psychologist, summed up the dominant American view of the 1940s when he wrote that “men not only learn when it is best to fight or not to fight, whom to fight and whom to appease, how to fight and how not to; but they also learn whom, when, and how to hate.” May went on to discuss the phenomenon of social learning for group aggressiveness:

Learning to fight and to hate involves much more than learning to box, to duel, or to participate in other forms of group violence. Systematic education for aggressive warfare in ancient Sparta or in modern Germany includes, besides physical education in games and contests, universal compulsory military training; the inculcation of certain attitudes, prejudices, beliefs; and devotion to leaders and ideals. The whole purpose and direction of such education is toward group aggression.<sup>16</sup>

Also important in this context is the phenomenon of “imitative learning,” whereby individuals are prone to do something if they witness others doing the same thing. Thus, aggressiveness and hostility—or, alternatively, an inclination to settle disputes peacefully—can become part of the ethos of a society.

### Self-Fulfilling Behaviors

An important sociological concept has been called the *self-fulfilling prophecy* (initially formulated by the sociologist Robert Merton), according to which a belief becomes true if enough people believe that it is true. In the realm of aggressive

behavior, hostility often begets hostility on the part of others, which in turn not only reinforces the initial hostility but also intensifies it. People may create their own interpersonal environments simply by behaving with a certain expectation: If someone is suspicious, secretive, and blameful, he or she is likely to elicit comparable behavior. This pattern has the makings of a vicious circle, in which hostility becomes self-reinforcing in a kind of positive feedback. A similar pattern can apply to international relations as well. For example, if country A, convinced of the hostility of country B, increases its armaments, B may well respond in kind. This in turn reinforces the “enemy image” already present, leading to further militarily oriented actions, each of which may truly be intended to be “defensive” but that, taken as a whole, diminish the security of all participants. Such a process characterizes much of the history of arms races.

### Redirected Aggression

Other patterns in behavioral development also take place, often without the explicit intent of producing aggressiveness. For example, in *displaced* or *redirected* aggression, a victim will attack an innocent third party who may have had nothing to do with the initial victimization. The Bible describes how the ancient Israelites designated an animal as a *scapegoat*, which would be abused and driven from the herd, ostensibly taking with it the sins and anger of those who remained behind—uninjured and purified.

Frequently, the victims of redirected aggression are smaller, weaker, or already the subjects of social abuse: a religious or racial minority, advocates of unpopular political doctrines, and so on. Blacks, communists, and dark-skinned immigrants in the United States; Arab immigrants in France; and religious and ethnic minorities (especially those with dark skin, such as the Roma, or Gypsies) in countries spawned by the collapse of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia all have borne the brunt of redirected aggression by people who are themselves deprived or disadvantaged. Although local minorities provide convenient “targets of opportunity,” foreign nationals are particularly targeted as objects of redirected group anger.

### The Authoritarian Personality

Following World War II and the Holocaust in which 6 million of Europe’s Jews (as well as millions of pacifists, gays, Roma, war resisters, mentally disabled people, political dissidents, and civilian noncombatants) were murdered, researchers led by the German philosopher Theodor Adorno and the American social psychologist Nevitt Sanford sought to identify those personal traits and experiences that predispose people toward anti-Semitism and related authoritarian and antidemocratic ideologies and practices. Their work resulted in the F-Scale (for Fascist), which gave a rough measure of an individual’s tendency toward authoritarianism.

The *authoritarian personality* was positively correlated with a rigidly hierarchical family structure: the husband dominant over the wife, and parents (especially fathers) demanding unquestioned obedience and respect from their children. This moralistic and disciplinarian style of child rearing was often combined with a

strongly nationalistic outlook, ready submission to powerful external authority, and fear of weakness and of moral “contamination” by “aliens and other outsiders.”

The notion of an authoritarian personality has largely gone out of fashion among mainstream psychologists. Closely connected to it, however, is the concept of *identification with the aggressor*. Here, the victim tends reflexively to adopt the attributes of a powerful punishing agent (parent, government) in order to alleviate anxiety; in the process, the victim is transformed into an aggressor, either directly or indirectly by supporting aggression on the part of others. It may be significant that comparatively permissive societies seem to be less warlike than those with high levels of physical punishment of children and of sexual repression.

### **Alienation and Totalism**

Psychoanalysts Erich Fromm and Erik Erikson have emphasized, more than their drive-oriented colleagues, the influences of culture, society, and the environment on people’s propensity for engaging in violent and other antisocial conduct. They have also focused on the role of painful, or traumatic, experiences operating through nonrational psychic processes. Fromm distinguished between *defensive aggression* and *malignant aggression*, with the latter involving a passionate drive to hurt others (sadism) or oneself (masochism). But unlike the human nature theorists, he attributed malignant aggression to social conditions rather than to innate human traits. In particular, Fromm blamed *alienation*, an acute loneliness and disconnectedness from others, for the inclination by some people to avenge their pain by acts of extreme destruction. According to Fromm, those who are extremely alienated are also ripe candidates for inclusion in violent organizations, where they can find satisfaction in a group that is united by its hatred of others. This might include the Ku Klux Klan and other neo-Nazis in the United States, skinheads in Great Britain, and other “terrorist” and hate groups worldwide. It must also be noted, however, that feelings of social and political alienation might also motivate psychologically healthy personalities to participate in social movements to *oppose* injustices and wars.

In a similar vein, Erikson pointed out that, especially when it is changing rapidly, a society may generate ambiguities and unresolved stresses that combine with the individual’s developmental problems to produce *totalism*, a susceptibility to all-or-nothing simplifications: us versus them, good versus evil, God versus the devil. War demands substantial sacrifices, not only economic and political but also a willingness to sacrifice one’s life and to go against the standard societal prohibition against taking another’s life. Accordingly, it is not surprising that totalistic thinking goes hand-in-hand with war.

## **The Attractions of War**

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In *Notes From Underground*, Dostoyevsky wrote, “In former days we saw justice in bloodshed and with our conscience at peace exterminated those we thought proper to kill. Now we do think bloodshed abominable and yet we engage in this abomination, and with more energy than ever.”<sup>17</sup> This energy derives at least in part from

the fact that some people find war a positive experience. Many combatants have extolled the sheer intensity of confronting the basic phenomena of life and death and, in the process, exploring the boundaries of one's capacities. For some soldiers, especially young men, there is something exhilarating about meeting death face-to-face, perhaps even heroically and for a noble cause, rather than being overtaken alone in the night. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (who served in World War I) wrote,

The front cannot but attract us, because it is . . . the extreme boundary between what you are already aware of, and what is still in the process of formation. Not only do you see there things that you experience nowhere else, but you also see emerge from within yourself an underlying stream of clarity, energy, and freedom that is to be found hardly anywhere else in ordinary life. . . . This exaltation is accompanied by a certain pain. Nonetheless it is indeed an exaltation. And that is why one likes the front in spite of everything, and misses it.<sup>18</sup>

For others, there may be a compelling sexual component, as revealed in this passage from the American novelist Norman Mailer:

All the deep, dark urges of man, the sacrifices on the hilltops, the churning lusts of night and sleep, weren't all of them contained in the shattering, screaming burst of a shell? The phallus-like shell that rides through a shining vagina of steel. The curve of sexual excitement and discharge, which is, after all, the physical core of life.<sup>19</sup>

Most significant of all, perhaps, is the satisfaction of "belonging" and companionship, particularly a kind of male bonding, which most men do not experience during civilian life. Shakespeare's *Henry V* rhapsodizes about the pleasure the forthcoming battle holds for

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;  
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me  
Shall be my brother. (*Henry V*, IV, iii)

The American philosopher and psychologist William James (1842–1910) believed that the raw emotional appeal of war constituted one of the greatest difficulties in overcoming it. In a renowned essay, James presented the case for war's attractiveness:

The war against war is going to be no holiday excursion or camping party. The military feelings are too deeply grounded to abdicate their place among our ideals until better substitutes are offered. . . . Showing war's irrationality and horror is of no effect upon him. The horrors make the fascination. War is the *strong* life; it is life *in extremis*. . . . Its "horrors" are a cheap price to pay for rescue from the only alternative supposed, of a world of clerks and teachers,

of . . . consumer's leagues and associated charities, of industrialism unlimited. . . . Militarism is the great preserver of our ideals of hardihood, and human life with no use for hardihood would be contemptible. Without risks or prizes for the darer, history would be insipid indeed.<sup>20</sup>

James then suggested that these attractions could be overcome only by substituting other crusades, involving risk, daring, and hard work, which he called "the moral equivalent of war."

These selections involve not so much enthusiasm for war as a grudging recognition that *even* war has not only its horrors but also its attractions. Other approaches have been more admiring of war itself. Thus, a famous *Bushidō* tract from ancient Japan advises that "when all things in life are false, there is only one thing true, death."<sup>21</sup> Although even the most war-prone ideologies generally claim that their long-term goals are to eliminate war, there is a notable modern exception: fascism. Fascism glorifies war, and (judging by its success in the 20th century) it struck a favorable chord in many people. "War alone," wrote Italian dictator Benito Mussolini,

brings up to their highest tension all human energies and puts a stamp of nobility upon the people who have the courage to meet it. All other trials are substitutes, which never really put a man in front of himself in the alternative of life and death. A doctrine, therefore, which begins with a prejudice in favor of peace is foreign to Fascism.<sup>22</sup>

A final contributing reason for war, working at the individual level, may well be a kind of sanitized romanticizing of battle, found in many children's cartoons and toys, movies, music, art, and literature. For example, consider the following verse by English poet A. E. Housman:

I did not lose my heart in summer's eve,  
 When roses to the moonrise burst apart:  
 When plumes were under heel and lead was flying,  
 In blood and smoke and flame I lost my heart.  
 I lost it to a soldier and a foeman,  
 A chap that did not kill me, but he tried;  
 That took the sabre straight and took it striking  
 And laughed and kissed his hand to me and died.<sup>23</sup>

To be sure, there also exists a rich catalog of antiwar songs, stories, movies, and poems, ranging from the delicate and plaintive (as in the song "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?") to the unrelentingly realistic and grotesque (as in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Johnny Got His Gun*, *Catch-22*, and *Saving Private Ryan*). Opponents

of war, however, are obliged to recognize those aspects of war that have long exercised a positive appeal for many humans.

## Inhibitions Against War

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The history of warfare shows that people are capable of the most heinous acts of brutality. From American history alone, consider the massacre of Sioux Indians at Wounded Knee in South Dakota in the late 19th century or the massacre at My Lai in Vietnam about 100 years later: In both cases, hundreds of men, women, and children were slaughtered wantonly. Indeed, the preceding sections may leave the impression that war exerts a virtually irresistible attraction to human beings at the individual level, whether through our innate characteristics, through our experiences, or via the lure of excitement, camaraderie, and ideology. But in fact, even beyond ethical and religious strictures, there are many inhibitions that serve to check the personal propensity for war.

One of these inhibiting factors is fear for one's own life. In Euripedes' *The Suppliants*, the Theban herald points out that "if death had been before their own eyes when they were giving their votes, Hellas [Greece] would never have rushed to her doom in mad desire for battle." There are, in fact, very few authentic heroes during a war; most soldiers seek to do the minimum necessary to save themselves and their close colleagues.

As to alleged bloodlust and war fever, consider that during World War II, rarely did more than 25% of American soldiers fire their guns in battle; even during intense battles, about 15% opened fire. And this applied to highly trained combat infantrymen. A study sponsored by the U.S. Army concluded that "it is therefore reasonable to believe that the average and healthy individual—the man who can endure the mental and physical stresses of combat—still has such an inner and usually unrealized resistance towards killing a fellow man that he will not of his own volition take life if it is possible to turn away from that responsibility."<sup>24</sup> It can even be argued that, in many wars before 1950, fear of killing, rather than fear of being killed, was the largest cause of battle failure.

By the Korean and Vietnam wars, however, the percentage of soldiers willing to fire their weapons appears to have gone up significantly, largely because of modified training and greater emphasis on establishing within-group solidarity among individual combat units. A major part of military training (especially in boot camp) seeks to countermand the basic moral teaching—not limited, incidentally, to Western tradition—"Thou shalt not kill." The goal of basic training, in the armed forces of most countries, has not so much been the teaching of new techniques and skills as the inculcation of new attitudes: unquestioning obedience to military superiors and a willingness to kill. Despite some resistance, most people can in fact learn these things, usually in just a few weeks. This should not be surprising, since a profound asymmetry of power exists between the recruits and the officers who train them: "Recruits usually have no more than twenty years' experience of the world, most of it as children, while the armies have had all of history to practice and perfect their techniques."<sup>25</sup>

Actual killing during combat is widely considered the role of enlisted men or, at most, junior officers. By 1914, for example, lieutenants and captains in the British Army led men into battle carrying only a swagger stick or, at most, a pistol. "Officers do not kill" was the common understanding at that time, and there is reason to believe that, if they had the choice, most enlisted men would not have done so either. George Orwell, for example, who fought as an anti-Fascist volunteer on the Loyalist side during the Spanish Civil War, recounted that he was unable to shoot an enemy soldier whom he observed

half-dressed and . . . holding up his trousers with both hands. . . . I did not shoot partly because of that detail about his trousers. . . . A man who is holding up his trousers isn't a "Fascist," he is visibly a fellow-creature, similar to yourself, and you don't feel like shooting him.<sup>26</sup>

## Some Issues in Nuclear Psychology

When it comes to nuclear war, feelings of attraction and revulsion are particularly intense. Some people evince a strange love for weapons of such all-encompassing power (hence the title of the famous satirical movie *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*). Others, by contrast, are especially repelled by the grisly prospect of ending life on so massive a scale. And yet, because a full-fledged nuclear conflict has not occurred and because, in addition, the effects of nuclear explosions are so powerful as literally to stagger the human imagination, most people have difficulty focusing their minds and energies on such a topic, which is at once horrifying and yet strangely unreal.

When confronted with deeply unpleasant information, for example, people often respond with *denial*. This process is particularly well known with respect to personal death: Virtually every cognitively unimpaired adult recognizes that eventually he or she will die; however, most of us go about our lives as though our own death holds little reality. When confronted with facts, we generally concur; if not, we often practice denial. Something similar can be identified with respect to the nuclear danger: Most of us go about our daily lives as though the prospect of instantaneous nuclear holocaust does not hang over us, simply because such an overwhelming threat is too painful and emotionally disruptive to admit into our moment-by-moment consciousness.

This behavior, although presumably adaptive for the individual, also has unintended and potentially dangerous consequences. By refusing to confront unpleasant realities, people who might otherwise become mobilized in opposition to nuclear weapons are likely to place their attention and energy elsewhere. Moreover, they abandon the field to those who have insulated themselves from the negative consequences of their activities and who, by virtue of career advancement and/or ideology, have committed themselves to a more pronuclear, and possibly prowar, orientation.

Denial is encouraged by the fact that nuclear weapons tend to lack psychological reality: They are kept in secret, restricted installations, and in the United

States the Department of Defense refuses, as a matter of policy, either to “confirm or deny” their presence. This policy has ostensibly been adopted so as to keep information from would-be nuclear terrorists. Regardless, one important effect of official secrecy clearly is to keep the American public uninformed and, to some extent, to facilitate denial. Hence, for most people, nuclear weapons cannot be seen, touched, smelled, or heard, so it requires a conscious effort to consider that they exist at all.

Closely related to denial is another personal, psychological phenomenon of the nuclear age, often called *psychic numbing*. This phrase was originally applied to the *hibakusha*, the victims of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Psychic numbing refers to a loss of emotional sensitivity and awareness that appeared to result from the survivors’ immersion in the mass death that characterized those events. It can be argued that, to some extent, we are all victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in that all of us suffer from some degree of psychic numbing, as the nuclear menace pervades our unconscious.

### A FINAL NOTE ON INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL EXPLANATIONS OF WARS

Approximately 1% to 2% of human deaths during the 20th century were inflicted by other human beings. In other words, 98% to 99% of recent human deaths were not caused directly by intentional, individually inflicted violence. Moreover, of those deaths caused by other people, the majority are due to collective violence rather than to individual aggression.

Many social scientists have insisted that war is a human invention, not a biological necessity. They cite the high level of social organization and structuring involved in any military enterprise and the fact that different societies make war, if they do so at all, in very different ways, depending on the social structures and technological options. Different societies also make war for different reasons, including pride, prestige, revenge, and the quest for resources. It can also be argued that decisions regarding war, especially in large, modern societies, are not made at the individual level, or at least not at the level of the average citizen. Certainly, such decisions do not involve the simple summation of all individual inclinations within the population; nor do they follow the results of plebiscites or referenda submitted to the citizenry to vote for or against a particular war. Rather, war is decided by political (and often military, economic, and strategic) elites, after which the populace generally goes along, sometimes eagerly but usually only after considerable manipulation or even outright coercion. And sometimes, war isn’t really deliberatively “decided” at all; it just seems to “happen,” often by mistake or misjudgment.

In addition, although war typically *arouses* great passions, it is not always true that war is the *result* of such passions. In some cases, wars appear to have been chosen by intelligent, instrumentally rational individuals, after carefully calculating the costs and benefits of alternative courses of action. According to military historian Michael Howard:

In general, men have fought during the past two hundred years neither because they are aggressive nor because they are acquisitive animals, but because they are reasoning ones: because they discern, or believe they can discern, dangers before they become immediate, the possibility of threats before they are made.<sup>27</sup>

Humans also fight when they can perceive—whether accurately or not—that they will gain substantially by doing so.

One influential view, then, is that, rather than being a result of instinctive human nature, war can be the consequence of our coolest, most cerebral faculties. Individuals may fight with passion when placed in warlike situations, but throughout history, authorities have often had to force their supposedly vicious, hotheaded, and war-loving citizens to fight at all. Traditionally, many soldiers have been forced into battle with guns at their backs, hating and fearing their officers and military discipline more than the “enemy.”

In any event, any serious effort to prevent war—and to establish a just and lasting peace—must take into account the inclinations and behavior of individual people, especially people with wealth and power. However, the “war against war” should not limit itself to the level of individual psychology, since, as we shall soon see, the behavior of organized groups may differ significantly from that predicted by a study of personal motivation and/or biology.

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### QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. To what degree is aggression “in our genes”? Is it learned, innate, or something in between?
2. How do you evaluate the Freudian claim that human beings have a “death drive”? What are the arguments for and against this view?
3. Do the attractions of war outweigh our inhibitions against it? Why or why not?
4. To what extent is war a biological necessity or a human invention, a learned behavior that could be unlearned?
5. What are the strengths and weaknesses of individual-level explanations of wars?

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