

Is War Primarily the Product of ‘Human Nature’?

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It is too great a task to identify a common cause of all wars, past and present, then attribute it responsibility for their commencing. However, what can be done is to identify certain foundations common in all “war”, and pay heed to how “states [or other structures] actually behave, behind the façade of their values-based rhetoric” (Kaplan, 2012, p.1). It will be this essay’s goal to determine first, what needs be included in the definition of “human nature”, and what constitutes “war”, and second, stake the claim that all political action, including that of states, is derived primarily from this definition of human nature.

The first task is to define what is meant by “war”, and while definitions abound, it is possible to order them into one of two categories supplied by the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary. The first is the modern conventional view, that war is “the state of armed conflict between nations or states” (Oxford, 2007, p.3573), and the second, considerably broader, of “any active hostility or struggle between living beings” (Oxford, 2007, p.3573). The former accounts well for conflicts that were overwhelmingly state-centric, such as the First World War, and marks a clear distinction between war and individual political violence: war is the business of states. However, is the Vietnam War to be understood—like the Korean—as a simple north versus south conflict, despite the northern state only assuming active involvement *nine years* after indigenous fighting broke out in 1955? (Young, 1991, p. 123) The second category, while accounting correctly for the National Liberation Front in Vietnam, is in need of qualification, or else runs the unhelpful risk of equating all acts with warfare.

While a simple merging of the two definitions would not suffice, there are some similarities to be observed. Both imply in the Clausewitzian sense that war is a tool used to achieve ends: “a continuation of politics by other means” (Clausewitz, 1989, p. 606). A state acts in its national interest, just as Islamist group *Ansar al-Dine* acts in its—and its people’s—religio-political interests in Mali (Welsh, 2013). The latter definition will be qualified by the observation that all actors engaged in war, be they NLF in Vietnam, or Ansar al-Dine in Mali, do so in hierarchical groups. “War” in this essay will be characterised by its employment by united, hierarchical structures, as a tool to achieve politics ends.

While it is accepted that wars have an almost infinite number of unique causes, the pursuit of a primary explanation has a long tradition. From Christian teachings arose what Neorealist, Kenneth Waltz, refers to as the “pessimistic” view of human nature, its advocates attesting to a fixed and flawed humanity, man’s[1] inherent evil (Waltz, 2001, p. 26). Among them is Sir Norman Angell who in 1925 wrote of man, the “fighting animal, emotional, passionate, illogical...” (Angell, p. 7). It is their view that while rationality is pursued, it is—and will forever be—blighted by the underlying imperfections of humanity, among them, the propensity to war.

The pessimist view endures, as do the principles established in 17th century philosopher, Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan*. That man will essentially pursue his own interests and this, in the absence of a higher power, will lead to conflict (Hobbes, 2008, pp. xxviii-xxx). In this state of anarchy (of no higher authority), of “war with every other man”, societies are apparently “few, fierce, short-lived, poor, nasty, and destroyed of all that pleasure, and beauty of life, which peace and society are wont to bring with them” (Hobbes, 2008, p. xxxi). Examples of such existences abound from the failed states of Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and it is for this reason that man yields his freedoms to authority, the only guarantor of peace. The philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, too observed that: “one man cannot begin to behave decently unless he has some assurance that others will not be able to ruin him”

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(Waltz, 2001, pp. 6-7); the state provides these assurances; this is why man assembles into states or other structures.

The state assumes the role of provider, acting too as arbitrator within its territory while its constituents obey. But what of a world in which multiple states emerge? Waltz writes that "Among men *as among states*, anarchy, or the absence of government, is [again] associated with the occurrence of violence" (emphasis mine) (Waltz, 1986, p. 98). However, that is not to say these societies are "few, and fierce", least of all "short-lived" as Hobbes predicted. Many states have long histories, and those that fail are clearly exceptions to the rule. What is really at fault here is the pessimist view that human nature is irrationally inclined to violence. As Waltz notes in his critique, "a static human nature cannot explain the differences in political outcomes. For example, one cannot explain both war and peace by arguing that man is wicked" (Griffiths, 1995, p. 66). Clearly there is another variable, without which human nature cannot suffice as the primary cause of war.

This additional variable becomes apparent in further reading of *Leviathan*, specifically concerning the environment mankind inhabits. Hobbes writes of the state of nature, "If any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their end [...] endeavour to destroy, or subdue one another" (Hobbes, 2008, p. 83). While it might seem this competition for resources is an alternative to the human nature claim to war, as will be seen, it is *only* by the combination of this factor and another of human nature, that war can be given any primary cause. It must be argued that the base requirements for mankind's survival are of such significance to human nature that the competition for these be included in its very definition. Survival, dependent first and foremost on the securing of these resources, and secondly on their protection, is integral to the causation of wars. However, there remains another question: why when two actors desire the same thing, does co-operation not play a greater role?

The answer is again found deeply embedded in one of the facets of man. As Hobbes observed, there is a great distrust among men. That a man need fear those "prepared with forces united to dispossess and deprive him, not only of the fruit of his labour, but also of his life or liberty", is cause for him to "master the persons of all men he can so long till he see no other power great enough to endanger him" (Hobbes, 2008, p. 57). In Realist terms, this is known as the "security dilemma" (Waltz, 2001, p. 37), and is sourced from the knowledge that one can never know the true intentions of another, and so can rely only on oneself. The same is true for states, which are again proven to be "man writ large" in the words of Morgenthau (Griffiths, 1995, p. 66). John Mearsheimer refers to this as the "uncertainty of intentions", and as a facet of human nature it has had disastrous consequences, most prominently in the beginning of the First World War. There had been an arms race in 1912 and 1913 all throughout Europe (Mulligan, 2010, p. 209) and when combined with high diplomatic tensions, and the scramble by Austria-Hungary, Germany, Russia and France to mobilise (Martel, 2003, pp. 2-3), a situation arose in which, states were unsure that "other states [did] not have offensive intentions to go along with their offensive capabilities" (Mearsheimer, 2003, p. 31). The likelihood of war here as a direct result of limitations imposed by human nature was irreversibly heightened, and the significance of this insurmountable fear—only *dampened* by defence spending—this limitation generates was exposed.

Mearsheimer's analysis, going further than the traditional Realist's, concludes similarly to Hobbes', that the only way to maintain security is to muster a power so great that no other can contest your strength. Writing on German eagerness for war in 1914, he claims it was "not a case of wacky strategic ideas pushing a state to start a war it was sure to lose" but "a calculated risk, motivated in large part by Germany's desire to [...] become Europe's hegemon" (Mearsheimer, 2003, p. 214). Here it can be seen that no matter how complex a state's policy, its own ability to procure *and defend* resources—defined in terms of power—is always the primary aim. As Morgenthau writes on power "whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim" (Morgenthau, 2006, p. 29). Now that a culpable human nature has been established, it is now time to see where it stands among other theories of the causes of war.

Central to all Realist beliefs about the state is that other states or entities cannot be relied on to guard the interests (among them, base necessities) of another, and by this mantra any collaboration will be limited. It is to this that Hans Morgenthau referred when he wrote that "the world, imperfect as it is from the rational point of view, is the result of forces inherent in human nature" (Morgenthau, 2006, p. 3). However, in Waltz's critique of political realism, he

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evaluates the cases for human nature and the structure of the state as causes of war and finds both wanting. "Optimists" of the former are dismissed as naïve, while the "pessimists" (among them Morgenthau) are denounced for drawing from an infinitely complex human nature the conclusions they might want to find (Waltz, 2001, pp. 39-40). The latter case, one that makes the argument that "good" states (often democracies) will not go to war, while "bad" states are positively inclined to it, is discredited by as simple means as specifying times when "good" states, without provocation, *have* sought war (Waltz, 2001, p. 8). The case Waltz himself presents, is that the cause of war among states is found at the systemic level, and is the absence of world government. On his own terms, anarchy is only the "permissive" cause: it allows for war to occur, but unless we are to revert to the discredited views of the pessimists (that irrational man pursues war without reason), there must also be an efficient cause. Waltz concedes too that for an "accurate understanding of international relations," "some combination of our three images, rather than any one of them, may be required" (Waltz, 2001, p. 14). Taken as such, anarchy sits comfortably as the *permissive* cause of war, while the expanded human nature fills the role of *efficient*.

Another claim to the cause of war was first promulgated by Samuel Huntington in his 1996 book, *The Clash of Civilisations*. The author stakes the claim that in coming years the western state system will be replaced by one in which "civilisations" play a greater role. Evidence of this transition is found in peoples of sub-national, ethnic, and religious groups uniting in defiance of their state identity, for example in 1994 when the people of Sarajevo displayed the flags of Saudi Arabia and Turkey, showing solidarity with their fellow Muslims, *not* with their traditional western allies or state (Huntington, 2011, p. 19). War, on Huntington's terms, is often found in the realms of society, in the West's imposition of its own indigenous culture, politics, and economics onto the rest of the world. This is becoming a strained process, and double-standards in practice mar Western efforts, Huntington highlights the case of nuclear proliferation for Israel, *but not for Iran*, whom the West deems "irresponsible" (Huntington, 2011, p. 184). These antagonisms eventually become real wars as defined earlier, and Huntington cites "Western arrogance, Islamic intolerance, and Sinic assertiveness" as the three components most likely to clash violently (Huntington, 2011, p. 183); the apparent "war" declared on America with the September 11th attacks by Islamic groups serves as testament to this claim (NBC News, 2001).

While Huntington's claims revolving as they do around a system that is not necessarily state-centric, might prove problematic to Realists, they have no such conflict with the proponents of the expanded human nature. *The Clash of Civilisations* offers a convincing account of a system comprised of non-state, but nonetheless hierarchically structured actors. While their policies might differ in focus and are less dogmatically security-focused, the Realist response, and indeed that of human nature proponents', is that these pursuits are *afforded* by a diligent state that maintains security, and that "all these more noble goals will be lost unless one makes provision for one's security" (Gilpin, 1986, p. 305). Irrespective of cultural identities, no man survives without food, water, and shelter.

Human nature, while not always clearly expressed, is the immediate basis of all human endeavours up to and including war. Its expanded terms come to include the pursuit of those resources most vital to survival, and its most defining facet is its blindness to the intentions of others. The transposition of these factors to the state or other structural level is absolute, guided as they are by man, and in man's interests, and it is from this transposition that the present society of states and relations emerged.

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[1] Old sense meaning both sexes, ignoring gendered pronouns and the like: man, men, mankind.

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