CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIAL LIVING, LANGUAGE, AND CULTURE FOR CONFLICT AND ITS MANAGEMENT

by Ward H. Goodenough

Abstract. Human language leads to an open-ended proliferation of human goals and purposes, which make for complex social relationships combining competition and dependence. The resulting ambivalence in social relationships makes the management of frustration and its attendant emotions a central concern of human socialization. The specific loading of emotional problems varies according to how societies are organized, but problems are inevitable. As relations of power and dependence become more complex, human efforts to manage these problems are liable to increasingly explosive and destructive expressions, apparently an inevitable consequence of social and sapient existence.

Human existence has been characterized throughout its recorded history by a tension between competition and conflict on the one hand and a desire to maintain orderly and harmonious social relations on the other. There are three common ways that this tension is interpreted. In one, conflict is a product of our underlying aggressive or baser nature, kept in check by culture and social institutions, especially those institutions concerned with moral behavior and its inculcation. Utopia, in this view, involves the development of a moral social order—something like a theocratic state—where moral authority is firmly asserted to maintain the upper hand over socially disruptive behavior and sin. In another view, underlying human nature is not aggressive but altruistic, and conflict and aggression are the result of imperfect social institutions. Utopia, accordingly, involves allowing humanity's own good nature to

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operate freely, unconstrained by the institutions that corrupt us in the process of serving the interests of a powerful few. In a third and perhaps more prevalent view, our nature includes both a better and a worse side, and Utopia requires achieving a design for living that appeals to our better side while at the same time inhibiting our baser one.

I shall try to present, very briefly, the perspective on conflict and cooperation to which my own reflections as an anthropologist have led me. What I shall say does not necessarily coincide with the view of any other anthropologist. It should not be taken as the anthropological position on the matter but only as one anthropologist's position.

All social and behavioral scientific theory rests on certain assumptions, often implicit, about human nature. We take for granted that, whatever may be the total range of things that characterize *Homo sapiens* as a species, they are such as to cause all human groups everywhere to exhibit a number of remarkable similarities of a general kind. All groups have well-developed languages, for example, and these are capable of being learned by people everywhere. Regardless of differences in phonology and grammar, moreover, these languages can be accurately described by the same analytic procedures. This fact implies that, with due allowance for differences among individuals, human cognitive aptitudes are everywhere of the same kind. That humans, regardless of cultural differences, appear to react to frustration with anger implies that human temperament and range of emotion are also essentially the same among all peoples. We observe, moreover, that all human groups have codes of conduct, definitions of what is right and what is wrong, and understandings regarding the acceptable limits of in-group conflict with customary procedures for dealing with it when it exceeds those limits. The implication follows that the processes by which humans construct social orders involve dealing with what are basically the same kinds of problems in all societies and dealing with them in ways that call upon the same kinds of resources and potentials for behavioral conditioning, cognitive learning, and social accommodation.

As these examples suggest, an anthropological approach to human nature takes account of several kinds of thing. First among them are the biogenetic potentials for and constraints on behavior, cognition, and emotion. Second are the ways these potentials are realized as individuals interact with their environment, including other individuals. Third are the ways that groups of interacting individuals produce cultural systems of mutual expectation and understanding out of their interactions and the ways they produce social orders and institutions from these cultural systems. Certainly, we anthropologists have as-

sumed that cultural and social phenomena, in their diversity and similarity, are products or artifacts of identifiable processes, processes that work within the relatively constant constraints imposed by facts common to the species as a whole and also within the much more variable constraints imposed by environment and history. In this respect, at least, our assumptions do not differ significantly from those underlying the various common views of the problem of human aggression and social conflict that I cited at the beginning of this paper.

There is some difference, however. As observers of the human scene, we must note that concern with conflict and aggression is proportional to the extent that people suffer from it or feel threatened by it. As members of human societies with apple carts of our own, we anthropologists share the concerns of our fellows about conflict and are inclined to get morally exercised about it. But as natural scientists we must look upon it differently. We must look at ourselves as we would look at the fishes or the insects and try to understand conflict as a natural human phenomenon. As such it presumably arises under predictable conditions. Its prevalence in human societies suggests that the processes promoting those predictable conditions are a natural part of the fabric of human existence. As natural scientists we cannot delude ourselves with visions of Utopia, but through better understanding and through a willingness to accept the implications of that understanding we can hope to learn to manage our own nature more adroitly.

Before doing this we have to confront the way things seem in fact to work. To this end let me return to consider some of those processes and constraints that are common to our species, to which I referred earlier. Among them are three things that stand out in my own thinking as crucial.

The first relates to the fact that humans, like other mammals, are capable of learning through operant conditioning. Survival requires humans, as well as many other animals, to learn to seek some things and to avoid other things in their environment. Such learning requires that we be able to distinguish one kind of thing from another, to treat some things as like and others as unlike. It requires that we categorize and classify the sensory inputs of experience, including experience of our own actions. It requires that we be able to associate kinds of actions with kinds of things in means-ends relationships. In classical learning theory such associations are established by the linking of action-object sequences with alterations of internal feeling states, such alterations serving to reinforce or to give preference or avoidance ratings to the action-object sequences linked with the changed feeling states. This adds up to survival requiring that behavior in animals, including us humans, be goal-directed or purposive. Purposive behavior develops

in response to the reinforcement mechanism, and it requires some minimum of cognitive capacity. Human complexity of purpose and highly developed cognition have presumably evolved together.

One thing to bear in mind about the reinforcement mechanism, as experiments have shown, is that in humans as well as in other animals actions resulting in immediately changed feeling states are heavily reinforced, whereas those that result in changes that are deferred in time are weakly reinforced, if at all. Short-run payoffs get high preference ratings over long-run ones.

The second thing I wish to consider is that humans are social animals. In this we are similar to a number of other animal species, but our sociality is accompanied by a long period of dependence of children on adults. Humans require continual interaction with others for their emotional well-being and for their physical survival. Human purposes include the enjoyment of services people can get only from one another in the context of on-going living in groups. Existence necessarily involves many daily transactions among those who live together in close mutual dependence.[1] Fellow humans with whom people live in such dependence are among the most important objects associated with both positive and negative conditioning.

The third and final consideration is that humans are symbol users. Language, we have observed, is a human universal. It greatly facilitates the storage and retrieval of information and provides a means of recall and memory, as distinct from mere recognition. It also provides a powerful calculus with which to reason. Thinking occurs, of course, apart from language, but language is a tool for thinking that has enormous power. Only language and its derivative systems of calculation, such as mathematics, provide means for formulating propositions.

The ability to formulate propositions greatly enhances the human ability to think analogically, and this ability, in turn, allows us to imagine things. If, for example, we have experienced some things as being black, white, red, brown, or purple, and if we have experienced cows as being black, white, and brown, then our ability to formulate the proposition that some cows are black, some are white, and some are brown allows us, by analogical inference, to formulate the proposition and thus to imagine that some might be red or purple. Only by imagining, moreover, can we think ahead into the future, devise plans, and fill our world with supernatural beings; and only by analogy and imagining can we attribute feelings and ideas to one another and thereby engage in those processes from which the phenomenon we call culture can emerge, at least in its elaborated human form. In conjunction with the culture building that it makes possible, language allows us to elaborate

our categorizations of experience and to multiply our purposes in ways that seem to be unlimited in their potential.[2] Further, language allows us to establish deeper and more complicated social bonds than we could without it. The way it affects human sociality and the complexity of human purpose contributes, I think, more than anything else to the underlying structure of human existence that is common to all societies, regardless of their different degrees of complexity in technology, economy, and political organization.

As I have said, language allows every individual to have a great variety of purposes or wants, many of which are incompatible. Optimal gratification or management of an individual's many wants requires scheduling the activities by which he gratifies them. Thus scheduling, fundamental to all economizing, is positively reinforced; and life in all societies is characterized by a considerable degree of scheduling of activities, by routines of living.

Having many competing wants forces people to make choices. This, in turn, has important consequences. Choices involve priorities, and the criteria for any set of habitual working priorities constitute a set of values. Here, too, schedules are important. To the extent that they segregate the occasions when different activities (involving different purposes) are performed, schedules allow people to shift from one set of priorities to another without conflict. The minimization of conflict of priorities and associated values is another source of positive reinforcement for scheduling.

Social living, together with the complexity of individual purposes, inevitably results in the recognition of some common purposes. It also results, of course, in competition among individuals. The consequences of competition in the context of social life are widely ramifying. Among social animals the resolution of such competition takes the form of pecking orders and dominance hierarchies, which are the natural outcomes of competition that involves no more than who can directly dominate whom, whether by intimidation or by impressiveness of other forms of display behavior. Pecking orders and dominance relationships are to be found among humans, too, whose cultures provide them with far greater resources both for intimidation and for elaborate and awesome display. But dominance relations among humans are mediated and also limited by a kind of social scheduling that language makes possible. Strong motivation and reinforcement for such mediation arises from the mutual dependencies that come from our nature as social animals, from the fact that each of us is an instrument for the gratification of our fellows' wants, at least our immediate fellows' wants.

What this mediation involves is basically the idea of taking turns. Taking turns is one of the lessons children begin to learn as soon as they

have learned to talk. It is one of the most important things to learn in the process of socialization. Taking turns, moreover, seems to be the basis of all jural relationships. To say to me that I must step back and let my sibling have a turn is to indicate that my sibling has a right and that I have a duty. In any agreed upon system of turns, each person's rights represent what he can demand as his turn from others, and each person's duties to others are defined by what others can demand as their turns from him. Turns, of course, have to do with priorities of access to the means of accomplishing purposes. Turn-taking involves understandings that govern shifts of priority from one person to another, understandings that when formulated in words become statements of rules. All jural relationships involve rules governing the allocation of rights and duties among persons, and such allocation serves to regulate the competition among individuals and categories of individuals in the pursuit of their purposes.

How rights and duties are to be allocated in a system of jural relationships also requires choices. In no society are all rights equally distributed among all parties. In the many relationships in which people operate, one person is likely to have fewer rights and more duties and another to have more rights and fewer duties. Such inequalities make it easier for persons in some categories to gratify more of their wants by comparison with persons in other categories. A society's social categories are never jurally equal in regard to the gratification of all wants. The cultural rules governing social relationships, accordingly, set various priorities among social categories (as between men and women or old and young, for example). Maintenance of these priorities requires that they be justified. The justifications people develop to rationalize their social rules are public statements of the values that the priorities in the rules imply. Whatever the priorities may be that are expressed in the cultural rules governing social relations, to the extent that human transactions occur within a framework of such rules that are publicly justified, these transactions involve moral as well as practical considerations.[3]

The definitions of social categories and of rights and duties governing their interactions that language makes possible serve also to provide the frameworks within which people experience themselves as social persons and, in the course of that experience, acquire self-awareness as persons.[4] The structured social environment within which people live, moreover, provides complicated arenas within which people in their transactions with one another seek to establish what amount to territorial claims. Territory is symbolically rather than physically structured, even when it relates to material things. The elaboration of rights and duties in relation to symbolically proliferated

subject matters widely extends the things that can evoke in humans the kind of agonistic behavior that other primates display in relation to a limited range of territorial subject matters.[5] Humans are affronted or insulted by a wide variety of possible infringements on the territory comprising the many symbolic manifestations of their multifaceted social selves. The possibilities for trespass are legion, and much human energy is expended in dealing with trespass and its socially disruptive consequences.

Dominance behavior, moreover, is directly affected by jural rules and cultural expectations governing social transactions. Attention is shifted from who can take from whom on the basis of dominance to who can impose his definition of the rules on his fellows and thereby gain advantages under the rules, advantages that acquire jural legitimacy with public acceptance of that definition. Much of what we think of as political behavior involves people's efforts to influence the terms of the rules, either so as to change them or so as to continue them; and political rituals serve, among other things, to reinforce acceptance of the rules either as they are or as they are being redefined by those who have the jural authority to redefine them.

Of great importance for this discussion is the obvious fact that rules, however necessary to orderly social life, put constraints on the freedom of individuals to pursue at least some of their purposes. People have reason, therefore, to ignore the rules when they feel they have more to gain than to lose by doing so. People also break the rules when they get carried away by the intensity of their purposes. Breaches of the rules are not only a personal problem for the individual whose rights have bene infringed; they are also a public problem for every person who sees his or her interests best served by keeping the rules in force as the basis for orderly social dealings. Societies may differ in the way they handle these problems, but they all have procedures of some kind for trying to deal with them.

The inevitable inequalities in any system of social rules tend to breed discontent with the rules in at least some individuals. Justification of such discontent is necessarily expressed in terms of some competing values that legitimate a revision of existing priorities. Enunciation of these new priorities often involves the definition of a utopian order in which major purposes frustrated by the existing rules are expected to be readily accomplished by everyone. Competition as to who shall define the rules is then expressed as a conflict between ideologies. The struggle for dominance becomes a struggle for the recruitment of adherents to one or another ideology and tends to take on the character of a holy war. Such phenomena occur and reoccur with amazing frequency all over the world. Their frequent occurrence seems to

follow inevitably out of the implications of the three things we are considering.

Associated with rights and duties and much involved in the dominance game is power. Power, too, derives from the fact that people have purposes. In one sense power involves a person's ability to accomplish his purposes without dependence on the cooperation or good will of others. If he controls the means for accomplishing what he wants, he has power. Socially, however, power involves a person's ability to prevent another from accomplishing his purposes. If I want nothing for myself, if I am indifferent to pain or to whether I live or die, then no one is in a position to influence my behavior, no one has any coercive power in relation to me. The more things I want for which I need the cooperation of others and the more intensely I want them, the more coercive power others have over me. A major function of any system of rights and duties is to define the bounds beyond which the exercise of power is unacceptable to a community's members and within which its exercise is legitimate. Rights not only legitimate power that people already have, they also confer power on people who would not otherwise have it by giving them the right to demand things.

In a small society, where people are relatively self-sufficient as individuals and are able to accomplish many of their more vital purposes independently of one another, the social field contains few opportunities for marked imbalances in the distribution of power. Moreover, the overall amount of power that it is possible to acquire—whether within or outside the social rules—is limited. As societies become complex, with more elaborate interdependencies among their members, the amount of power that is present (or at least latently present) increases. The possibilities for marked imbalances in the distribution of power increase accordingly, as do the possibilities for the misuse of power and for trespass, frustration, and resentment.

There is one more consequence of turn-taking that I must mention. Turn-taking requires that people learn how to wait for their turn and thus to defer gratification. It requires people to give up some of their purposes entirely, and it requires that they find ways of managing their disappointment and frustration with its attendant anger and self-pity. Insofar as a person is dependent on others he is liable to be frustrated by them. So it is that he suffers most of his frustrations from the same people through whom he also derives most of his benefits. These people tend to be the ones with whom he lives most intimately in day-to-day association. Intimate relationships therefore tend to become highly charged emotionally in ways that jeopardize their being able to continue to meet the needs they serve. People need to be able to

express their negative feelings in ways that do not jeopardize their interests. In this, of course, more immediate and short-run interests take priority over spatially and temporally more distant ones.

The emotional problems that are so much a part of human existence are engendered, then, by the complexity of human wants in the context of social living, and they are shaped by the particular system of turn-taking that a society's rules of conduct maintains. Different rules and different social customs create different kinds of occasions for emotional experience and different kinds of chronic frustrations—experiences and frustrations that change with different stages of life. A universal human problem for each individual is to learn to manage his emotions in a way that allows him to develop and maintain within his society's system of social relationships a sense of self that is fulfilling and rewarding and with which he can be comfortable. These problems of self-maintenance and self-fulfillment are a major focus of human religious activity.[6] Issues of self-pride and self-respect, especially of collective self-pride and self-respect, play an important motivating role in religious and social reform movements, movements that have produced some of the most violent and intransigent conflicts in human history.[7]

I conclude then with the observation that the problem of conflict, in the form it confronts us today, derives from those things about ourselves as humans in which we have always taken greatest pride as setting us apart from other animals—language and culture. The scale and intensity of conflict, moreover, escalates in potential as societies become more complex technologically, economically, socially, and politically. This involves more and more people in more complicated interdependencies, in proliferating fields of power, in greater possibilities for inequality of rights and for social oppression, in greater chronic humiliation and frustration of wants, in greater need for utopian visions of salvation, and in greater possibilities for mass politico-religious upheavals of enormous emotional intensity. It seems that the very things on which we pride ourselves—language, culture, civilization—are also in themselves a root source of the conditions that promote conflict, even while at the same time they provide us with such things as schedules, jural rules, and religious ceremonies as resources for helping to control it.

Human evolution, in short, by the very nature of the processes and materials involved, has included within it a growing potential for and probability of increasingly intense conflict. The threat it poses and the problem of dealing with it are a price humanity is having to pay for its evolutionary success.

NOTES

1. Frederik Barth, *Models of Social Organization*, Royal Anthropological Institute, occasional paper no. 23 (London, 1966).
2. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).
3. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967).
4. G. H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934).
5. Cf., Robert Ardrey, *The Territorial Imperative* (New York: Dell, 1966).
6. Ward H. Goodenough, "Toward an Anthropologically Useful Definition of Religion," in *Changing Perspectives in the Scientific Study of Religion*, ed. A. E. Ester (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974), pp. 165-84.
7. Ward H. Goodenough, *Cooperation in Change* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1963), chaps. 9, 11.

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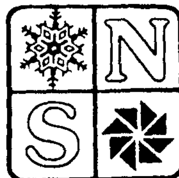

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