

IS VIOLENCE NATURAL?

by *Garrett Hardin*

Abstract. The balance of obedience/aggressiveness is necessarily skewed to the left in infancy; maturation shifts it to the right. Hierarchies greatly reduce overt violence. Positional shifts in a hierarchy take place through violence or the threat of violence. Self-serving individuals tend to upset hierarchical balance. Peace is served by the acceptance of a sovereign power (like the nation), which gives justice precedence over fairness. "Justice as fairness" is a pernicious doctrine. Religion has in the past favored secular sovereignty for the sake of peace; hence the protection of religions by sovereign powers.

Those who live a relatively sheltered life, as I admit I do, have a strong feeling that violence is unnatural or abnormal. So it may be, if by abnormal we mean something out of the ordinary. Yet, although it may be abnormal, it can hardly be labeled unnatural, for anything that exists is natural. The literature attesting to the existence of violence is huge. Although I have witnessed only few examples of real violence myself, millions of people in my generation have not led so placid an existence. If we have faith that the phenomena of the world can be rationally explained, we cannot dispose of violence merely by labeling it unnatural. We must find a way of fitting this relatively rare phenomenon in with other human behavior.

As always, our task is made easier by including the rest of the animal world in our explanatory scheme. Although the focus of this discussion will be on humanity, it will move back and forth from human history to animal behavior.

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AGGRESSION, CONFLICT AVOIDANCE, AND SOCIAL HIERARCHIES

The profligacy of natural reproduction makes competition between members of the same species inescapable. Survival puts a premium on being able to get the better of conspecifics. This fact favors an aggressive attitude towards the members of one's own species. But there can be "too much of a good thing"; aggression untempered by more peaceful reactions would be devastating to individuals in the long run and hence to the species. In the development of the individual there is a long period when he should be subservient to the significant others in his life: this is the period of immaturity. To survive, a child must be willing to be dominated by adults. Then, as the developmental period comes to an end, the individual finds he occupies an ambiguous position. If he insists on acting aggressively toward every conspecific he encounters, he will not live long. Those who are more able than he will "put him down," perhaps even extinguish his life. Even acting aggressively only toward inferiors on every possible occasion may be fatal: each contest, even those he wins, erodes his physiological reserves to some extent. The individual cannot even afford to win all the time.

Because of the peril of overt physical contests, even to the winner, selection has favored softening the contests to a symbolic level; posturings and threats of various sorts, coupled with timely subservience to such threats, reduce the bloodshed. Out of frequently repeated symbolic contests there arises a "peck order," named for the barnyard fowl in which it was first carefully studied. Individuals are genetically programmed to accept the legitimacy of the results of symbolic contests, which place the members of a group in a hierarchy of rights and privileges. The details of the symbolism, the extent to which the symbolic substitutes for the overt, and the temporal stability of the hierarchy vary from species to species.¹ Even the sexes within a species may differ: the peck order among hens is stable; among roosters it is not.

Survival of the individual animal is favored by a coupling of apparently contradictory behaviors: domineering behavior toward conspecifics lower in the hierarchy and submissiveness to conspecifics who are hierarchically superior. Thus arises a built-in and inescapable ambivalence in behavior. Nothing is permanent in this vale of tears, certainly not a hierarchy which tends constantly to be eroded by the approach of senility among the older members and the influx of new, vigorous younger members. Random disease and random historical experiences exert their disturbing effects on hierarchies also. For many reasons the individual must not only have the capability of being ambivalent; he must also be able to pass through a dialectical shift from subservience to dominance and from dominance to subservience. The animal who was dominant on Tuesday may need to be subservient on

Wednesday, or vice versa. An animal can move up in a hierarchy only by an act of aggression. (Among human beings, of course, with the elaboration of a verbal culture and verbal tools, the aggression may be solely at the verbal level and may be infinitely subtle. But aggression it is, nonetheless.) The animal moving up in the scale must depart from its customary behavior, at least towards one competitor, and become more aggressive than it has been in the immediate past. Nothing less than violence may suffice to bring about the dialectical shift. Hierarchies are adaptable to the inevitable changes that time brings only because individuals have this capability of being periodically aggressive, perhaps even periodically violent.

To summarize, the logical sequence of ideas is as follows. Real individual differences are ubiquitous. Competition is inescapable. Relative peace, which is to everyone's advantage in the long run, is favored by hierarchies. The inevitable changes that history brings about require hierarchies to be changeable. A change in the hierarchy is brought about necessarily by aggression. Sometimes aggression reaches the violent level.

What are animals selected for? Obviously they are selected both for aggressive tendencies and for avoiding conflict. They are the victims, as it were, of a balanced ambivalence. Attempts to explain the history of humankind in terms of human nature will fail if either tendency is ignored. Humans are neither wholly aggressive, nor wholly peaceful.

There is no reason to think that the balance of ambivalence is the same in all human beings, and there are many reasons for postulating a wide variation. The mean balanced ambivalence in any identifiable group is not necessarily the same as that of any other. The balance can be influenced not only by genetic factors but also by cultural factors. It surely should not be necessary to prove a truism of this sort.

In each particular situation the truism does not help us very much; our problem is to estimate the reasons for the balance in each situation with a view to possibly shifting the balance in a direction that reason tells us will be more favorable to survival. This is a problem that we can expect to remain with us forever. Its inescapability does not diminish the interest of it.

Sexual differences illuminate the concept of balanced ambivalence. With rare exceptions—and they are subject to the same sort of analytical explanation as the general case that we will consider—males are more aggressive than females. The reason for this is understood in terms of the idea of reproductive cost as developed by W. D. Hamilton and R. L. Trivers.² In selection, reproduction is the payoff, of course. The reason polygyny is so much more common than polyandry is because there productive payoff is greater for polygyny than it is for

polyandry. A female with many males as mates will probably not produce more offspring, but a male with many females as mates will.

In passing it should be pointed out that polygyny is most common when parental care is least. By contrast, polyandry is commonest in human societies in which economic conditions are so unfavorable that children have a far better chance of being reared to adulthood if there are several men supporting a single mother. This situation is found among several groups in India.

Any animal that embarks on an aggressive career stands both to gain and lose. It gains when it wins an aggressive encounter and thus increases the probability of its having children. It loses when it loses the encounter or when it is weakened by too many successful but nonetheless damaging encounters. Since the reproductive winnings available to a male (who can inseminate many females) are large, the male animal can afford to take more chances. Put in terms of gambling, the male can afford to take greater risks because the payoff for winning is so much greater than it is for a female. Since the female cannot increase the number of her offspring by having multiple inseminators, she has little to gain by improving her position in a hierarchy. Of course, if the male contributes significantly to the success of her offspring and if a more dominant male can contribute more than less dominant ones, then, if moving up in a hierarchy means coming under the protection of a more dominant male, the female "social climber" gains. However, this is clearly a minor consideration as compared with the forces operating on males.

In this very general argument we find a simple Darwinistic explanation for the greater aggressiveness of males as compared to females. Greater aggressiveness means that violence, which may be a pathological extreme of aggression, will be exhibited more frequently by males than it will by females.

To explain violence rationally we must study situations that alter the balance of ambivalent impulses. This is a large task which the present essay will only touch upon, but we can make a beginning.

For most animals most of the time, the better part of wisdom may be to accept small changes in hierarchical position rather than fight back against each new threat. But there comes a time when the losses may be seen as too great, producing a dialectical shift in the balance of impulses. Hugh Thomas has given us a striking instance of the triumph of aggressive impulses:

Next to speak was Millán Astray, a man from whom there seemed more shot away than there was of flesh remaining. He had but one leg, one eye, one arm, few fingers left on his one remaining hand. "We have no fear of them," he shouted, "let them come and see what we are capable of under this flag." A voice was heard crying "*Viva Millán Astray!*" "What's that?" cried the General,

"No *vivas* for me! But let all shout with me, *Viva la muerte! Abajo la inteligencia!*" (Long live death! Down with intelligence!) The crowd echoed this mad slogan. He added, "Now let the Reds come! Death to them all!" So saying, he flung his cap into the crowd amid extraordinary excitement.³

Hopelessness can lead to euphoria, which may be lethally unadaptive. On the other hand, such euphoria may subsequently be justified by the victory that comes to the individual who is totally motivated toward winning. This is one of the considerations that should move the rational, dominant individual not to push his advantage so far that he moves the losing adversary into the euphoric, irrational mode of behavior.

STABILITY AND THE SOVEREIGN STATE

Approaching the problem from the other side we can ask, what circumstances favor hierarchical stability in the community? As an individual I may stand to gain by upsetting the stable arrangement in my favor, but as a member of the community it is generally to my interest that stable arrangements not be frequently upset. Community interest favors hierarchical stability. How is this stability to be achieved? History and anthropology reveal a number of mechanisms, of which the following are the most obvious.

The idea (assuming its individual acceptance) of a sovereign state is a stabilizing force. Conflicts between individuals which are settled on an individual-to-individual basis, or even family-to-family basis, are too apt to lead to enduring feuds. The instability arises out of the inherent asymmetry in the evaluations of fairness or equity by the participants in any conflict. Natural selection favors the distorted perceptions of fairness that produce asymmetry. The results can be devastating in the long run. Once a feud is established it feeds upon itself. Violence escalates. Unless a greater social power intervenes, stability may come only when one antagonist extinguishes the other. The social solution to this problem lies in the creation of a sovereign power which can punish both winners and losers—and can escalate its punishment if need be. A sovereign power replaces the idea of fairness with the idea of justice. Social peace requires this substitution.

But why should the individual accept the sovereignty of the state? There is no simple answer, but historically the great legitimator of national sovereignty was religion. Religion is a hard thing to define, but operationally it is clear that every religion robust enough to serve as the foundation of a sovereign state includes dogmas that are defined, or covertly accepted, as unquestionable. During the impressionable years of childhood these dogmas are silently built into the psyche so firmly that questioning them becomes, quite literally, unthinkable. Other

things being equal, a religious state is immensely more successful in maintaining order and reducing violence than is a secular state.

When the bases of religion are undermined by doubt, the state is faced with the problem of finding a new justification for its sovereignty. In a democracy this takes the form of "*Vox populi, vox Dei.*" Curiously, this formula is somewhat effective in the secular state, although logically perhaps it should not be. But it is always subject to the erosion of doubt. After all, "populus" refers to my neighbors, and it is a bit difficult for me to maintain a strong faith in the divine guidance of mere neighbors!

For the thoroughgoing rationalist who lives in a secular state there is only one way that the argument of sovereignty can be maintained; this is by the individual acceptance of the necessity of arbitrary decisions or, to put the matter another way, by the individual acceptance of the necessity of sovereignty. Sovereignty, then, becomes not something that *is* but something that *is accepted*. This, I believe, is the rational form of the argument in Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*. We accept the "leviathan" we call a sovereign state because, if we do not, violence will break out and life will become, as Hobbes said, ". . . nasty, brutish, and short."⁴ People differ in their willingness to grant the legitimacy of national sovereignty. Those who do not accept a rational legitimation of the state should be more prone to resort to violence at the incipient signs of the weakening of their leviathan.

Under the most utopian conditions it is probable that violence can never be reduced to zero in a society. A major function of sovereignty is to control violence, but paradoxically the sovereign demonstrates its ability to control violence by resorting to violence itself. Not on a large scale, perhaps, and perhaps only from time to time. But, at least now and then, a sovereign power must show that it has *power*.

This is probably the explanation of that phenomenon of ancient religion that so puzzles the adherent of the pale modern religions called liberal. Violence and sacrifice were essential parts of ancient religions as René Girard demonstrates in his classic, *Violence and the Sacred*.⁵ In the western world religion has become tamed and powerless. This has been true for so long now that we are shocked when the old connection between violence and the sacred is reestablished, as it was in the Jonestown massacre. We note that this reestablishment took place because the inhabitants of Jonestown had absented themselves from the sovereignty in which they were brought up, the United States, thus effectively destroying that sovereignty, while at the same time they had scarcely fallen under any new sovereignty, since the country of their refuge, British Guyana, was relatively indifferent to their existence and their behavior. Cut off from all other sovereignties these unhappy people were in desperate need of a new sovereignty, which

they tried to find in their religion. Being newly hatched, this sovereignty was not supported by the force of a lifelong, unquestioned commitment; its legitimacy had to be established by violence which, in the event, proved lethal. The extremity of such violence moves us to call it pathological, but in a profound sense it is truly natural. To most "enlightened" and "liberal" people in the western world calling violence natural is very disturbing; however, if we want to make sense of the world around us, we must use words that are true to nature in all its complexity.

CODA: VIOLENCE VERSUS FAIRNESS

Many weeks after the above words were written the liberal establishment in the United States was shaken to its very core by the nearly simultaneous invasion of Lebanon by the Israelis and the British repulse of the Argentines in the Falklands. America's disastrous adventure in Vietnam had left most liberals with the comforting assurance that they could never again approve of violence. Then came Lebanon and the Falklands, and by early summer 1982 the pages of liberal journals were rife with admissions that perhaps violence was sometimes justified. Some of the admissions were reluctant, some were shamefaced, and some bewildered. To their credit, liberals admitted that they had learned from experience.

What had been learned? Very ancient wisdom indeed: that people and nations differ, if not fundamentally at least at any particular moment in time; that the probing actions of an aggressor, when they meet with complacency, will be followed by escalated aggression; that every action is also a message; that lack of reaction is also a message; that the most relevant predictor of the future is the immediate past; and that, if "it takes two to make a fight," it is equally true that it takes two to make a peace. No man of action, no person in a position of responsibility, has to be reminded of such truisms; but most commentators in the press and on the air are not men and women of action and they are largely shielded from responsibility. They enjoy the luxury of entertaining illusions that can prove fatal when they infect those who must act.

Field Marshall Lord Carver has reminded the public of the sort of thinking that should take place in the planning of a military action: "one should clarify one's aim before one embarks upon a military operation; ruthlessly and objectively dissect and analyze where it will lead one, what is to be gained from it, and what one will be faced with when it is over."⁶ It should be obvious that this advice applies every bit as much to civilian as to military affairs, and to inaction as much as to action. Before settling on any course of action or inaction one should

honestly ask the question, What will we be faced with “when it is over”? This is but another version of the fundamental question of applied ecology. And then what?⁷ Time has no stop, and a plan of action that produces a momentary gain is indefensible if its foreseeable further consequences add up to a disaster.

At the risk of losing some of my friends I will make a statement that will shock many but the acceptance of which is, I deeply believe, necessary for survival: *The concept of fairness is a poor guide to intelligent action.* Is the peck order of a chicken pen fair? It is not, but it minimizes bloodshed and permits the chickens to go about the business of living instead of fighting all the time. Is it fair that the British should continue to hold the Falklands when it was the French who first settled there, later selling the islands to Spain, which lost them to the Spanish-speaking people of Argentina, who were driven out by the British in 1833? Is it fair for America to hang on to the state of Texas which, by force and duplicity, was taken by Americans in 1845 from the Spanish colony now called Mexico? To take an example from civilian life, is it fair that a forty-five-year-old man should hold on to a high-paying position in a business firm if his twenty-five-year-old subordinate is much better fitted for the job? Is it fair that any person or any nation should hold on to property when thorough investigation shows it was stolen from someone else in the remote past?

To try to build an ethical system on “justice and fairness,” as one modern philosopher has done, is to miss apprehending the heart of justice. The first goal of justice is to create a *modus vivendi* so that life can go on, not only in the next few minutes but also indefinitely into the future. Those who identify unfairness as injustice and deem it intolerable should mull over the words of the self-taught philosopher Eric Hoffer: “Given the choice of injustice or disorder, I would take injustice, because you can live long enough to repair injustice. With disorder, we will all be destroyed.”⁸ The eminent jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes, referring to his “brethren” on the bench of the United States Supreme Court, has also pointed to the dangers inherent in the tricky concept of justice/fairness: “I have said to my brethren many times that I hate justice, which means that I know if a man begins to talk about that, for one reason or another he is shirking thinking in legal terms.”⁹ Among jurists “legal” means operationally proper and productive of social order.

Those who give pride of place to fairness should try to outline a fair solution to the political problems of the Near East. There is none. There is no way to end so ancient a feud in which all sides can give plausible arguments for their positions, except through the use of force or the credible threat of force, exerted on the part of a larger commu-

nity which has in mind not only the interests of the present generation but also of future generations, who stand more in need of peace and order than they do of fairness.

Whenever possible, property rights should be allocated fairly, but the claim of such rights must be moderated by a sort of statute of limitations. Society has long recognized that the force of ancient claims is subject to a decay process very much like the negative exponential decay of radioactive elements. Time must play a role in ethical judgments; if it is excluded, feuds can go on forever as living becomes unbearable.

It is only to be expected that the person or nation that loses as a result of the judgment of a greater power (be it an individual or a community) should seek to overturn the judgment. If all else fails, the loser may resort to violence. At this point, if the greater power backs down out of an ill-advised sense of fairness, all is lost. The violence of the loser then not only wins its immediate goal but, worse, it encourages other losers to choose the path of violence. I do not see how the consequences of habitually yielding to the violence of losers can produce fairness, justice, order, or peace in the world.

It should be clear then that, no matter how much we may deprecate violence as policy, we must continue to assert our willingness to react violently (and promptly!) against violence, whenever such reaction seems the best course of action in the long run. Violence, like original sin, is not something we can completely eliminate from life; on the contrary, violence is a powerful and dangerous force with which we must somehow learn to live.

NOTES

1. Martin W. Schein, ed., *Social Hierarchy and Dominance* (Stroudsburg, Penna.: Dowden, Hutchinson & Ross, 1975).

2. William D. Hamilton, "The Genetical Theory of Social Behavior: I and II," *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 7 (1964): 1-52; R. L. Trivers, "Parent-Offspring Conflict," in *Readings in Sociobiology*, ed. T. H. Clutton-Brock and Paul. H. Harvey (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1978).

3. Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (New York: Harper, 1961), p. 272.

4. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, or Matter, Form, and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiastical and Civil*, Great Books of the Western World, 54 vols. (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 23:85.

5. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Press, 1977).

6. Henry Fairlie, "What the Falklands Teaches Us," *New Republic* 521 (12 July 1982): 8-12. The quotation is from Lord Michael Carver's book, *War Since 1945* (New York: Putnam, 1981).

7. Garrett Hardin, "An Ecolate View of the Human Predicament," in *Global Resources: Perspectives and Alternatives*, ed. Clair N. McRostie (Baltimore, Md.: University Park Press, 1980).

8. Spoken on a Columbia Broadcasting System television interview, 29 January 1969. I have been told that Goethe voiced much the same sentiment.

9. Irving Lee, *The Language of Wisdom and Folly* (New York: Harper, 1949), p. 317.