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Steve Taylor Ph.D.
Out of the Darkness

How Natural is War to Human Beings?

The Case for a Peaceful Past

Posted Sep 25, 2016

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If you look at the world today, and if you survey the human race's recorded history, it's easy to see our species as innately bloodthirsty and aggressive species. It seems as if warfare and brutality have been omnipresent, and are natural to human beings. And indeed, this is the conclusion that many scholars and scientists have reached. One of the founders of [evolutionary psychology](#), E.O. Wilson, referred to warfare as "humanity's hereditary curse," whereas another evolutionary psychologist, Steven Pinker, has suggested that "chronic raiding and feuding characterize life in a state of nature."

However, there is a great deal of evidence suggesting that this view is false. In 2005, I published a book called *The Fall*, which argued that the human race's prehistory was relatively harmonious, and that phenomena such as warfare, male domination, social hierarchies and theistic religions only began to emerge around 6000 years ago, due to the development of a strong sense of individuality and separation. At the time of the book's publication, the idea that prehistoric hunter-gatherer groups were peaceful and egalitarian was more controversial, even though it was supported by a great many archeologists and anthropologists. But I'm pleased to say that over the last 10 years, this idea has gained more evidence and support, and has become much more widely accepted.

For example, in 2014, a study of 21 contemporary hunter-gatherer groups by the anthropologists Fry and Soderberg showed a striking lack of evidence for inter-group conflict over the last hundred years. There was only society (an Australian Aboriginal group called the Tiwi) who had a history of group killings. In another study focused on prehistory, the anthropologist Bryan Ferguson (2013) carried out a detailed survey of Neolithic Europe and the near East, and found almost no evidence of warfare. Ferguson found that warfare only became common around 3500 BCE. In the Levant - an area which includes present day Jordan, Syria, Israel and Palestine - there was also no sign of warfare until 3500 BCE, even though the area had been densely populated and farmed since 9000 BCE. Also in 2013, the anthropologists Jonathan Haas and Matthew Piscitelli surveyed descriptions of 2900 prehistoric human skeletons from scientific literature, and apart from single massacre site in Sudan (in which two dozen people were killed), only four skeletons showed signs of violence - and even these signs were consistent with homicide rather than warfare. As the authors note, this "dearth of violence" completely contrasts "with later periods when warfare clearly appears in this historical record of specific societies and is marked by skeletal markers of violence, weapons of war, defensive sites and architecture, etc...." "The presumed universality of warfare in human history and ancestry may be satisfying to popular sentiment; however, such universality lacks empirical support."

extremely flexible with regard to membership and geographic extent.”) It seems very unlikely that different groups were in continual conflict with another of resources. In fact, rather than being in conflict, contemporary foraging groups interact with each other a good deal. They regularly visit each other, make [marriage](#) alliances, and often switch membership. Even David Barash, otherwise an orthodox evolutionary psychologist, admits that “a strong case can and has been made that nomadic forager social systems in particular predispose against violent interpersonal [competition](#).”

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Group conflict amongst chimpanzees has also been seen as evidence for the innate warlikeness of human beings, since they are our closest relatives. However, there have always been doubts about how innate chimpanzee group violence is, and how much if it is due to human interference and encroachment. When studied in completely natural environments, chimpanzees are much more peaceful. It is also significant that we human beings are as closely related to bonobos as we are to chimpanzees, and it has always been accepted that bonobos are extremely peaceful. Modern researchers have never observed a single incidence of group conflict or murder amongst bonobos.

In other words, the evidence strongly suggests that group conflict is not innate to human beings, and only became prevalent at a fairly late stage in human history. Why did it become prevalent? At the moment there is no clear answer. Some scholars have suggested a connection to the onset of agriculture, others to the first large-scale settlements, to population pressure - whereas my theory is that this was due a psychological change in certain human groups.

This issue is much more than a pedantic academic argument. Our view of human nature determines our view of the human race’s future. If we believe that human beings are innately warlike, then there is no reason for us to believe that our future holds anything else but more of the chaos and conflict that has filled our past. But if we believe that conflict is not innate to us, and that our [aggression](#) is due to external factors rather than being “hard-wired” into us, then we’re entitled to have a different vision of the future. We were a peaceful species once before, so there’s no reason why we should give up hope of becoming peaceful once again.

Steve Taylor PhD is a senior lecturer in psychology at Leeds Beckett University. He is the author of the *Fall, Back to Sanity* and several other books. www.stevenmtaylor.com

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About the Author



Steve Taylor, Ph.D., is senior lecturer in psychology at Leeds Beckett University. He is the author of several best-selling books, including *The Leap* and *Spiritual Science*.