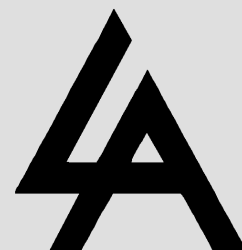


THE CAUSES OF AGGRESSION

JARRET B. WOLLSTEIN



COLLECTIVE DEATH WISH?

We live in a world which seems to become more violent every day. Terrorist bombings, political death squads, war, torture and atrocities fill the headlines of newspapers. At times it seems that mankind has a collective death wish, and there is a real danger that the human race will destroy itself in an orgy of violence.

Most people and societies seem to regard violence and aggression with ambivalence. On the one hand, people seem to have a natural repugnance for murderers, thieves and brutes, and there is no society which countenances uncontrolled aggression within itself. On the other hand, popular entertainment is filled with increasingly graphic violence, which people generally enjoy. And violence committed in the name of a 'noble cause' is commonly applauded. Most governments routinely encourage and reward violence directed against 'deviants', 'dissidents', and foreign and domestic 'enemies.' Why are human beings so aggressively violent?

Many factors have been associated with aggression, including broken homes, parental abuse, racism, living in a criminal sub-culture, worrying about nuclear war, phases of the moon, chemical imbalances in the brain, bad nutrition, environmental pollution, war toys, violence in television, depravity in movies, poverty, inequality, pornography, rising expectations, lowered standards, unemployment, the pressures of modern society, poor toilet training, sexual repression, sexual freedom, lack of parental guidance, excessive parental expectations, breakup of the extended family, overcrowding, loneliness, alienation, too much choice, bad genes, designer jeans, and just the plain perversity of the human species. At times it seems that aggression, like cancer, can be caused by just about everything.

There is a reason why so many factors have been associated with aggression. The motive for aggression is the same as the motive

for most human action: *unfulfilled needs and wants*. If you can imagine a being who is totally self-contained, totally fulfilled; who doesn't need food, doesn't need shelter, has no sexual desire, has no curiosity and lacks nothing. It is difficult to imagine why such a being would bother doing anything. Man in contrast, continually needs — food, clothing, shelter, sex, entertainment, knowledge, affection, power and so on, ad infinitum. Human beings are very motivated indeed.

For a person to choose to use violence as a means of fulfilling his wants and needs, there is only the additional requirement that he must perceive violence as an acceptable means and as a more effective way of fulfilling wants and needs than alternative courses of action.

Violence is also much more likely when other, non-violent methods of satisfying wants and needs are somehow blocked. In identifying the necessary causes of aggression, we therefore should look at factors which lead people to regard violence as an acceptable and effective method of achieving their ends. There are at least seven such factors: (1) neurosis, (2) collectivism, (3) government, (4) envy, (5) ignorance, (6) desperation, and (7) greed.

NEUROSIS

Most violent aggressions, other than robbery and theft, are 'crimes of passion'. Arson and rape, for example, are generally the acts of psychotics and the mentally disturbed. Most murders are not committed by Mafia hitmen or drug addicts trying to get money for a fix, but by members of families against each other. The most likely person to kill you is your own mate.

Neurosis, like aggression itself, is attributed to a virtually unlimited number of factors. Since human beings exhibit such a broad range of behaviour, ethics and neurosis, what is the standard for normality and mental health?

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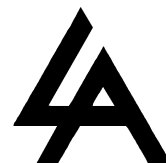
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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



The humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow proposed a standard very much in accord with the approach of libertarianism. Maslow argued that the standard for human behavior should not be a statistical average of how people actually behave, but rather how the best, happiest, most productive, most creative, and most fulfilled human beings act — people such as Thomas Jefferson, Albert Einstein, and Aldous Huxley. In other words, the standard for mental health should be man at his best, as he sometimes is, and as he might and ought to be. Maslow called these exemplary human beings, “self-actualizers” or “the growing tip” of the human race.

Comparing self-actualizers to less fulfilled, creative and happy people, Maslow found that most neurosis is caused by the frustration of what he termed *basic* human needs.

A basic, as opposed to a derived need, is an innate and fundamental biological or psychological requirement for human well-being. Writing in *Toward a Psychology of Being*¹ Maslow listed five criteria for distinguishing basic needs:

- i Its absence breeds illness.
- ii Its presence prevents illness.
- iii Its restoration cures illness.
- iv Under certain, very complex, free choice situations it is preferred by the deprived person over other satisfactions.
- v It is found to be inactive, at a low ebb, or functionally absent in the healthy person. (Because it is a fulfilled need for healthy persons, and a fulfilled need is not a strong motivating force.)

Maslow listed the following seven basic needs: Physiological Needs — such as food, sleep, sex (in its simplest sense), air and shelter; Safety Needs — such as security, order and stability; Belong- ingness and Love Needs; Self-actualization Needs — “the desire to become more than one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming”;² The Desire to Know and Understand - intellectual curiosity, the search for meaning; Aesthetic Needs - the need for beauty in one’s life.

Aggression, Maslow maintained, is principally a product of the frustration, the impeded satisfaction, of basic needs. Sigmund Freud, for example, focused upon the effects of the frustration of the need for sex and belonging, which were highly frustrated in Europe in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, where he lived and worked.

While there is far from universal agreement with all of Maslow’s theories, there is little doubt that the frustration of fundamental human needs leads to mental illness, lack of self-esteem, and aggression. In other words, aggression is not for the most part inherent in man, but is rather a human reaction to circumstances in which basic aspects of man’s nature are denigrated, denied and unfulfilled.

Examples are legion. In the Soviet Union, one of the most sexually repressed and controlling societies on earth, alcoholism is rampant, and hypocrisy, theft of state “property” and bribery are a way of life. In Northern Ireland, Southeast Asia and Lebanon — which have suffered from generation after generation of war — no one, understandably, feels secure, and psychologists report generalized feelings of despair, anxiety and hostility, particularly among children.

Aggression created by neurosis, which in turn is largely created by the frustration of basic human needs, can be eliminated in two ways. First, people need to create societies and social customs which are consistent with human nature and not contrary to it. For example, instead of teaching that sex is evil and prohibiting consensual sexual acts, sex should be treated as a natural, normal and healthy human expression. Similarly, people should be legally and psychologically free to express compassionate feelings (belongingness needs) and should be free to pursue their own ends in their own way (self-actualization needs). Secondly, people must have the opportunity to learn how to satisfy their basic needs. For

example, people must learn that it is alright to take reasonable risks. This is a problem of psychological and ethical education.

It is obvious that in most countries in the world today, the satisfaction of most basic needs is strongly frustrated by paternalistic and authoritarian governments, and archaic anti-life doctrines, notably religion. The only way violence caused by frustration of basic needs can be ended, is by eliminating its ideological and institutional causes.

COLLECTIVISM

A particularly virulent form of neurosis is the myth of the collective, henceforth called collectivism. This is the idea that a social collective — called society, the people, the state or any of many other names — has needs, or rights, or moral authority, in brief, has an *identity*, above and apart from the individuals who compose it. Collectivism is the root of such familiar assertions as “the needs of the people are more important than the rights of individuals”, “you have a duty to serve your country”, “production for people, not profits”, “your leaders know best”, and “ask not what your country can do for you: ask what you can do for your country”. Collectivism is the philosophical basis for communism, fascism and socialism.

Collectivism often sounds humane, because it stresses the importance of human needs. In reality it is little more than a rationalization for the sacrifice of some people to the needs of others.

The idea that social collectives have an identity above and apart from the individuals who compose them rationalizes treating individuals as objects to be controlled and ruled, rather than as persons with feelings and rights. In its most developed form, in totalitarian societies such as Pol Pot’s Cambodia or Hitler’s Germany, the myth of the collective is expressed as the idea that the group is everything and the individual is nothing. As the fascist Alfredo Rocco wrote:

“[Fascism stresses] the necessity, for which the older doctrines make little allowance, of sacrifice, even up to the total immolation of individuals, on behalf of society ... For Liberalism, the individual is the end and society the means; nor is it conceivable that the individual, considered in the dignity an ultimate finality, be lowered to mere instrumentality. For Fascism, society is the end, individuals the means, and its whole life consists in using individuals as instruments for its social ends.”³

Collectivism also encourages racism and war. If one group of people or country has an identity, then another group of people or another country can have a different identity. And like individual identity, social identity can be good or evil. Hence the myth of the collective justifies stereotyping people by their membership in social groups, and rationalizes treating people as if they were nothing more than embodiments of such stereotypes. Thus in Nazi Germany, Jews were *by definition* evil and Aryans were good, regardless of their individual characters or deeds. And in World War II and the Vietnam War, American soldiers commonly referred to their Japanese or Indochinese enemies as “gooks”, subhuman objects, not real people.

Collectivists encourage people to think of themselves and others, not as individuals, but as members of social groups. Hence such popularly accepted bromides as “my country right or wrong”. Acceptance of the myth of the collective does much to explain why normally peaceful men become butchers and barbarians when politicians tell them they are fighting for a noble cause.

The same collectivist mentality can also be seen in the way police sometimes deal with members of racial and social minorities, and this mentality pervades the way that politicians deal with social problems.

In reality, collectives do not have consciousness, will or identities. Only individuals have identities. “Society”, “the people”, and “government” do not feel, need or think at all — much less have rights and a moral authority apart and above the individuals which compose them. Members of social groups and different societies

are often radically different from each other. And a person's character and moral worth is determined by the choices he makes, not by the group to which he belongs. Members of a social group are not all the same, nor do they have the same moral character.

Each human being is like every other human being since we all have the same *general* biological and psychological needs, which constitute our species identity. But each person is also *unlike* every other person in how their needs are manifested, and how relatively important different needs are, and these differences create our unique, individual identities. In neither case, is a person's essential nature a product of his social group, nor does a social group have an independent consciousness or will.

The myth of the collective, in one form or another, is accepted by the vast majority of people alive today. Simply listing the many, frequently subtle forms in which the myth appears would take a book. A great deal of the violence in the world today is a result of the acceptance of that myth, particularly violence embodied in such forms as racism, war, and government. In fact, the belief that coercive government is necessary is itself a form of the myth of the collective.

GOVERNMENT

Governments inspire aggression in many ways. First and most important, governments themselves *commit* most aggressions. This is obvious in the case of wars, which are violent battles for control of territory, resources and power by governments. Other less obvious, but no less pervasive and destructive forms of government aggression include taxation (theft), the draft (involuntary servitude), interference with and prohibition of voluntary trade, assassination of political enemies, and other forms of compulsion, such as mandatory public schooling, censorship and imprisonment of dissidents.

Governments also indirectly cause a good deal of street crime. For example, by outlawing drugs, the street price of heroin and other opiates in the United States has gone up as much as 5,000 times the hospital price, making it impossible for most users to legally earn enough money to buy drugs, and thus forcing them to turn to theft or prostitution. As much as 80% of street crimes in major U.S. cities, such as New York and Chicago, is estimated to be drug-related. In fact, organized crime itself largely owes its existence to profits generated by such illegal activities as gambling, prostitution and drugs. In areas such as Nevada, where gambling and prostitution are legal, the dominance of organized crime is greatly diminished. Full legalization of victimless crimes would break the power of organized crime completely, and along with it such comparatively minor organized crime enterprises as murder for hire.

If drug laws were eliminated, drugs users would no longer have to steal to maintain their habits, and thus up to 80% of big city crime would be eliminated.

Legalizing drug use, prostitution, gambling and other victimless crimes would also end the violent nature of these enterprises. Drug pushers shoot it out with each other and with police precisely because the illegality of drugs both makes potential profits enormously high and places drug sellers and drug buyers outside of the normal legal framework, with its relatively peaceful methods of enforcing contracts, resolving disputes and protecting people from violence. Similarly, pimps can frequently get away with beating up their prostitutes, and prostitutes can get away with robbing customers, because prostitution exists outside of the normal legal framework, and both prostitutes and their clients are understandably very reluctant to go to the police. The violence associated with most victimless crimes can easily be eliminated by making victimless crimes legal.

Street crime motivated by economic deprivation is also largely caused by government, which is principally responsible for that deprivation. Government creates the greatest economic hardship on the poorest segments of society through its taxes, regulations and licensing laws. Consider the plight of a poor black boy living in a welfare family. First the government tells his mother that it is

illegal for her to collect welfare benefits if a man is living in the house, forcing the biological or adopted father to leave, depriving him of a role model. Then the boy goes to a school where he learns (or rather is told) about Shakespearean literature and quadratic equations, but generally doesn't learn any marketable skill. Until the boy is sixteen it is illegal for him to work, depriving him of useful experience and the family of needed money - at least from legal sources. When he becomes old enough to apply for a job, he discovers that most employers cannot afford to hire him because the government has established a minimum wage above what his labour is worth on the market. If he tries to earn some money by fixing his neighbours plumbing or helping them patch up a hole in the roof, he discovers that it is illegal to do such work without being accepted by a union and getting numerous government licenses, which he has little chance of getting. If he tries to start his own business, he will discover that he first needs to get a business license, hire a lawyer to get permits and tell him what regulations he needs to comply with, and obey numerous wage, hour and product regulations, while paying a host of taxes, including social security, inventory tax, business tax, income tax, property tax, and so on. Everywhere he turns, the way is blocked by government restrictions. Is it any wonder that such a person comes to hate the "white establishment" and sees crime as the only way of getting ahead?

Next, government causes aggression by the failure of the prison system. To be sentenced to most prisons is tantamount to being sentenced to be beaten up and raped by other prisoners, and to being humiliated and abused by guards. It doesn't matter whether you are in jail for draft evasion or murder, your fate is likely to be the same. In case after case, young teenagers who have committed some minor crime — such as shoplifting, or getting into a fist fight, or even staying out after curfew — have been put into jail for a few days or months, only to emerge confirmed enemies of society. Prisons are schools for crime, and generally breed more aggressors than they deter. The government, which maintains prisons, must bear responsibility for these deplorable conditions.

Finally, governments cause aggression by example. First, people are told that government has the right to force them to attend school, serve in the military, and serve on a jury. Then they see numerous examples of government officials extolling the virtues of force and violence, profiting from corruption, and trying to use military force as a solution to complex social and economic problems. In authoritarian and totalitarian societies, where political power and wealth are obtained by violence, governments provide even more encouragement for aggression.

Overall, governments are easily responsible for most of the violence in the world.

ENVY

Envy is the hatred of the wealthy and successful for being wealthy and successful. Envy is most prevalent in societies and cultures which teach that inequality or wealth is unfair or evil, such as socialist Russia and Islamic Iran.

The denigration or rejection of wealth and success is irrational because: people are inherently different, and never will be the same as each other; wealth and success are signs of achievement and increase human security, freedom and happiness, and; the attempt to eliminate differences of income and status for achievement destroys the incentive for achievement and creativity, making life worse for everyone.

Success, wealth and achievement can be regarded either as values to be attained or evils to be eliminated. If they are regarded as evils, everyone is ground down to the lowest, most miserable, most incompetent level. If they are regarded as values, mankind is inspired to higher levels of performance, comfort and knowledge.

Fortunately, until recently, envy was rare in the United States. One British politician contrasted the difference between American and British attitudes towards wealth in this way: if an American sees a well-dressed man riding in a Rolls-Royce with a beautiful woman by his side, he thinks: "someday I'll be there." If a typical

Englishman sees the same man ride by, he thinks: "We'll think of a way of getting you out of there."

Fundamentally, envy is based upon a rejection of the reality of human difference, despair at the possibilities for one's own achievement, and hatred of the good for being good. Envy is a very common, and very destructive form of human neurosis.

IGNORANCE

A person can imagine it is to his benefit to use violence to obtain his ends, and be quite wrong. Many of our actions have consequences quite different from what we intend - particularly in the long run. Frequently, actions which have pleasurable consequences in the short run have disastrous consequences in the long run. For example, ice cream and cake taste very good, but the sugar in them can rot your teeth, cause you to gain large amounts of weight (when eaten to excess), cause artificial mood elevation and depression, and ruin your nutrition. Similarly, a casual sexual encounter can feel very good, but can lead to a debilitating venereal disease, pregnancy or a paternity suit.

Since long-term consequences are often quite different from short-term effects, people need to consider such consequences when making choices. Many people — perhaps most people — frequently do not.

Similarly, we must look not only at the effect of our actions upon ourselves, but their effects upon others as well. Human beings are social animals, and we want and need many things from other people, including commerce, affection, companionship, friendship, love, sex, and approval. We also care about the welfare of others, and it is hard to imagine a person being content in a world in which he was well off, but in which every one else was suffering miserably. Again, how our actions affect others is not always immediately obvious, and ignorance of such effects can lead to disastrous consequences.

Finally, a person's life is not a series of isolated acts, but an integrated whole. Isolated episodes which seem good and desirable in themselves can turn out to be a waste of time and totally inconsistent with the overall end of happiness. Life is a series of stages. Choices made at an earlier stage influence the possibilities open to you later. As the philosopher Mortimer Adler writes:

"... do you ... understand further that the problem of making a whole human life that is really good — good in each of its parts, and good in a way that results from each part's contributing what it ought to contribute to the whole — exists for you precisely because at every stage of your life, in every day of your existence, you are faced with the basic moral alternative of choosing between a good time today and a good life as a whole — a choice between what is only useful, expedient or pleasant in the short run, and what will contribute, in the long run, to making your whole life good."⁴

Ignorance of these factors leads many people to regard aggression as reasonable and proper. Knowledge of these factors would lead many aggressors to reject aggression as contrary to their enlightened self-interest.

DESPERATION

Your wife is dying of cancer and the only way you can pay for the operation is to steal the money. Your children are starving to death and the only way you can get food is to steal it. Someone is trying to kill you and the only way you can protect yourself is to blow up their house, killing their innocent friends as well.

Fortunately, such desperate situations are rare in the industrialized West, and the growing wealth of Western society, coupled with the spread of charitable institutions, has greatly reduced desperate situations. But where they exist they provide a very understandable motive for aggression.

GREED

The desire for profit is a perfectly natural and reasonable motive. Greed may be defined as an *excessive* desire for profit, irrationally placing material gain before all other values and being indifferent to the psychological consequences that such single-minded pursuit of profit has upon oneself, and the social and psychological consequences it has upon others.

Since man is a material being with material needs, it is impossible to live, much less be happy, without some material possessions. In addition, money and wealth are generally values, giving a person freedom to achieve his ends, increasing his security from adversity, and enabling him to live in luxury and comfort. Material wealth, however, is far from the only value in human life.

The dictators of the Soviet Union, for example, are among the wealthiest people on the face of the earth. Yet they are also among the most miserable people. They have little freedom to speak or act, since they are trapped in a stagnant and hypocritical political system with elaborate and stifling codes of behaviour. In addition, they can trust no one, and can be deposed and stripped of their wealth at any time — unless they are very, very careful. Finally, they live with the knowledge that their power rests upon the misery and dehumanization of others.

Wealth obtained at the price of own's own enslavement, continual fear, and the misery and suffering of others, is hardly something any psychologically healthy person would want. This illustrates an important principle: How wealth is obtained is as important as wealth itself. Most aggression committed to procure wealth would not take place if the aggressors were psychologically healthy and were fully aware of the consequences of their actions upon others.

ENDING AGGRESSION

Four steps would end most aggression in the world:

- i Teach people that their basic needs are not evil, and start teaching them how to fulfill those needs.
- ii Provide rational, moral and ethical education for young people, explaining that if they consider the long-term and general consequences of their actions, aggression is almost never in their enlightened self-interest.
- iii Refute and reject the myth of the collective.
- iv Abolish government violations of individual rights, particularly aggression by government itself, victimless crime laws and other actions of government which interfere with individuals pursuing their own peaceful ends in their own way.

These four steps would eliminate the psychological, moral and social causes of aggression, which account for 90% of the aggression in the world today.

Human beings are not inherently violent, rapacious animals, bent on brutality and self-destruction. Violence is rather a by-product of governments and of an ideological environment which conspire to frustrate, debilitate and degrade our humanity. Violence can probably never be totally eliminated, but it can be reduced to a very low level, given a proper understanding of its causes, and the will to change our governments and our social customs and beliefs.

NOTES

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