Malignant aggression – the xenophobic instinct

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An eternal question for mankind has long been to know the source and reason for what might be called malignant aggression, that human characteristic that has been manifested collectively in the pointless slaughter of war and conquest, genocide and slavery, and individually in participation in horrendous acts of murder, pillage, rape, torture and so forth. Indeed, such violence seems to be the main determinant of the course of history.

It is a question that has occupied many a philosopher, psychologist and scientist, for it would appear that something special has gone wrong with evolution such that it would produce a species capable of wantonly killing its own kind, and apparently quite willing to eradicate itself and all life on the planet as well. Collectively, mankind seems especially insane, and it would seem that nothing in the study of evolution could demonstrate how such a situation could have occurred. In the past, such deliberation has probably led to much pernicious religious dogma such as the doctrine of original sin and the necessity of redemption, confessional practices and the belief in the irresistibility of sin and the superhuman power of evil, and the literal belief in the devil as an actor on the world stage.

It turns out, however, if a theory I’ve been working on is correct, that the seeds of human malignant violence grew from a necessary and beneficial characteristic in our immediate ancestors, the great apes, and it is only when this tendency became subject to the human abilities of language and symbolic behaviour that it then became unmanageable, uncontrollable for many, and the catalyst behind mankind’s collective insanity.

The psychiatrist and author Erich Fromm, in his 1973 treatise, The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness, took up what is still an excellent analysis of the problem. His first task was to debunk a theory that had been proposed in the 1960s by the Nobel-prize winning ethologist Konrad Lorenz. His book, On Aggression, had become a best-seller, and its main thesis was that mankind’s collective behaviour as manifested in violence and destructiveness of every sort is due to a genetically programmed, powerful and innate disposition for aggression that forever lies in wait for the opportunity to express itself. In other words, mankind’s problem with violence was based on an instinct for violence that we were essentially powerless to counteract.

In his critique, Fromm relentlessly makes the case for the dismissal of the “instinctivist” theories on aggression. To begin his analysis, Fromm first stresses the important distinction between benign, biologically adaptive aggression, such as is aroused for the defence of life or territory, or for obtaining food, compared with what he calls malignant aggression, whose definition should be obvious. According to Fromm, it is a distinction which Lorenz and the instinctivists failed completely to make, seriously undermining their theories on that count alone.

Fromm then shows in a broad survey of animal and human behaviour that the evidence is solidly against blaming inherited instincts for violence and malignant aggression as the main determinant of the course of history. Fromm also makes the following important observation of why a theory such as Lorenz’ gained so much popular attention. To sum up his views on that point:

The turmoil and increasingly violent nature of the period when the theory captured the
public mind, during which we witnessed the assassinations of the Kennedys, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, the Cuban missile crisis and the increasing threat of nuclear holocaust, through to the darkest days of the Vietnam genocide: such events produced in people a widely perceived feeling of powerlessness to change things, certainly contributing to the popularity of Lorenz’s neoinstinctivism. It was a case of public susceptibility rather than any scientific rigour of the theory — it was rejected by most psychologists and neuroscientists, according to Fromm. Its great appeal to the public also stemmed from the fact that it was a “magic bullet” kind of theory, pretending to explain away a complex phenomenon with an easy-to-understand, all-encompassing and irremediable cause. It was the always popular kind of explanation that more or less relieved the reader from feeling any responsibility for the situation — how could one hope to go against a psychologically inbuilt inevitability?

Although Fromm certainly succeeds in discrediting Lorenz’ “instinct for violence” theory, I believe, nevertheless, that it is indeed an instinct at the root of the problem. It is an instinct that has come into existence through long evolutionary pathways, one that has been critical and necessary for the evolution of the most advanced hominid species. Its effects may therefore be surmised to be important, universal among members of our species as well as other advanced hominid and ape species, yet with the negative blowback for humans that it is indeed at the root of our problem with irrational violence and malignant aggression. It is not, however, an instinct for violence, nor aggression whether defensive or malignant, but an instinct which can be satisfied through a variety of behaviours, and whose net effect was a key factor in allowing the evolution of complex societies, large brains, and, surprisingly, true altruistic behaviour.

My theory would take far more time to justify with evidence than I have available today, so once again I must ask your indulgence when I insist that my brief outline to follow has been well researched and thought out, and would be far more convincing were you to see the complete body of evidence I have collected. I hope soon to finish a paper on the subject, but for now let me just describe the basic features of the idea so that I can connect it with the problem of prohibition. In fact, I already published an introduction to these ideas in the International Journal of Drug Policy in 1999. The paper was titled, “Drug Prohibition: A Perverted Instinct?” From that title you will already get a hint of the connection between my theory and the problem we are concerned with here today.

The concept of instinct needs some rehabilitation, however. Whether due to some still-lingering absurdities from the long reign of Behaviourist psychology, or the general tendency of scientists today to disbelieve in an entity unless having on hand several specimens in formaldehyde, it seems that mainstream science today is loathe even to use the word, substituting “innate behaviour” or some other euphemism when they need to explain certain behaviours. However, in promoting a rehabilitation of the term and concept of instinct I am not proposing we go back to accepting the ideas that proliferated early in the 20th century, with the long lists of sometimes very dubious things that were supposed to be instincts. For me, it seems that the concept of instinct was in its beginnings scientifically useful, and still is, but that it became corrupted by too wide and too wild an interpretation, especially by the public, leading to its discredit. This is no reason to throw out the baby with the bath-water, however. Many terms have general use meanings completely at odds with their scientific use. And not all scientists have joined in the condemnation, far from it. Here is what a top authority on cognitive neuroscience has to say: Jaak Panksepp has stated in his book Affective Neuroscience that,

“It is becoming increasingly clear that humans have as many instinctual operating systems in their brains as other mammals. However, in mature humans such instinctual processes
may be difficult to observe because they are no longer expressed directly in adult behavior but instead are filtered and modified by higher cognitive activity. Thus, in adult humans, many instincts manifest themselves only as subtle psychological tendencies, such as subjective feeling states, which provide internal guidance to behavior.” 6

I think we can accept the validity of such a view in spite of widespread professional objections, even if we do not know exactly how an instinct is implemented in the brain, or perhaps in some as-yet unproved manifestation such as a species collective memory, or whether we yet understand how an instinct is transmitted from generation to generation. For neuroscientists, everything is in the hard wiring. For evolutionary biologists, everything is in the genes. I’d recommend that they should go looking for the gene or the hard-wiring that makes them believe such reductionist nonsense!

Given the importance of instinct for behaviour throughout the entire animal kingdom, and the obvious way that instinct itself has been subject to evolutionary principles, it would be curious indeed if suddenly a species arose, ourselves, whose behaviour was simply beyond the influence of instinct. With that observation, I’ll leave my brief justification of instinct as a real and effective determinant of behaviour not only for animals but for humans as well, and go on to the meat of my theory.

So what is this instinct I propose that results in malignant violence and aggression? Agreeing with Fromm, the instinct itself has nothing to do with violence per se, but is one that arose and developed as advanced mammals – especially the monkeys and apes – began living in larger and larger, and more complex social groups. It is now believed that the advancing complexity of social groups and the demands that this entailed on individuals, was the primary evolutionary engine for the rapid increase in brain size we see in monkeys and apes through to the hominids and our own species. 7 This increase in brain size, so rapid as to be declared by evolutionary biology as unprecedented, was obviously the most important development leading to the appearance of our species.

In order to live in complex, stable, exclusionary and coherent social groups, members of a group would necessarily have to know who was in the group, and who was not. To make a long story short concerning my findings, knowing who is in the “in-group” involves many complex aspects of individual and group interactions and thus could not be subject to a simple instinctive drive to enable it. Managing all the complexities of interactions in large social groups was and is the domain of our powerful and large brains, not something that could possibly be controlled by a simple instinct. However, knowing whether a given individual is in the “out-group” is a straightforward matter: it could easily be mediated by instinctive behaviour that led individuals and the group to define as the necessary characteristic any simple, easily-transmitted perception or quickly-invoked attitude about unfamiliar individuals. Once that determination has been made, it persists like a knee-jerk reflex.

And so, evolutionary pressures ensured that as ape societies became more complex, an instinct for xenophobia would develop, that is, an instinct mediating a simple, group-wide ability to instantly know an outsider, exclude him and thus preserve group coherence and stability. I call this, quite simply, the xenophobic instinct. It further turns out that recent research has shown that such group coherence, necessary so that group selection might occur, was the key evolutionary development that allowed the appearance of true altruistic behaviour.8 I’ll have to leave that tantalising idea with just a brief mention, and continue with my central theme, but you can follow this and other ideas from the list of references supplied with the printed version of my lecture.
As for evidence of xenophobia and its instinctive nature in humans I wish to cite just two or three authorities on the matter.

In a paper by Alain Schmitt and Karl Grammer we read, “Indeed, xenophobia and ethnocentrism are universals and a primate legacy.”

The noted ethologist Eibl-Eibesfeldt writes, “Xenophobia is a universal quality...an important component of the human behavioural repertoire. Infantile xenophobia was...observed in all cultures we studied. [Even children] born both blind and deaf display fear of strangers.”

Xenophobia in children and infants, observed in every culture, a primate legacy. And if exhibited by infants, no chance of cultural transmission by learning. Now if that is not an instinct, I should like to know why.

Let me briefly say some further things about instincts before I tie the matter to our present concerns.

— Instincts are in some ways like prejudices. It can be very difficult if not impossible to identify them as causative agents in one’s own behaviour. It’s not surprising that we, especially the scientists among us, believe that our rationality reigns supreme, free from inherited, unconscious determinants. That is, quite simply, the way it feels to be conscious.

Instinct and prejudice are also similar in that their sources lie in historical and psychological happenings mostly inaccessible to current awareness: from early childhood experiences and learning in the case of prejudice, and from hard-wiring or even collective species’ memory in the case of instincts. We see, of course, the major difference between instinct and prejudice: whilst the latter is something learned, instinct is inherent and inherited.

Consider then the never-ending phenomenon of racism, a very obvious example of a tragically common behaviour enabled and aggravated by the xenophobic instinct. We believe that racism has its roots in prejudice, and true, some aspects of racism are learned in childhood – they are culturally transmitted. But the cultural transmission of racist attitudes would not be nearly so effective, and a permanent feature of human societies, if it were not enabled by the pre-existing xenophobic instinct in the first place. It is the instinct which makes it so easy to impart life-long racist attitudes to young children, although the particulars of who is to be subject to that racism is culturally determined.

It can be exceedingly tricky to demonstrate in a given individual whether he does indeed harbour racist convictions. But in his society as a whole, for example in the south of the U.S., the prevalence of black/white only facilities, lynchings, organisations such as the KKK, or recently, even widespread voter suppression and so forth, demonstrates that racist prejudice must be widespread and have an indelible effect on the collective behaviour of that society. This observation then lends a proof of the universal prevalence of the xenophobic instinct.

— Instinct in humans, as is made clear in the Panksepp quotation I read to you, does not cause an on-or-off, all-or-nothing effect. The actual net effect of a given instinct might well be “subtle” and even vanishingly small, “filtered and modified by higher cognitive activity”, for an individual. But an instinct exerting a slight but significant tendency collectively in a large social group, should result in a powerful force. We humans, on issues and preferences that are “6 of one, a half-dozen of the other,” tend to split reliably very close to 50/50 in
our decisions (for instance consider how close honest elections tend to be, always very close to 50/50. Thanks to Diebold touchscreen voting machines, even the dishonest ones don’t go far from an even split!). Therefore, such an incremental or even differential effect of an instinct, when applied to entire populations, may well translate into an important motivator for behaviour exhibited collectively. And this effect should be magnified due to another human propensity: when a style or perception gets rolling in one direction (whether due to the subtle influence of an instinct or otherwise), a great many seem to pile onto the bandwagon just for the ride.

— One further point, and this might at once provide an operational definition as well as a diagnostic characteristic for instinct: Satisfying an instinct makes the individual feel good, rewarded, successful, like he has accomplished something, but without any rational or logical perception of why or how that has happened.

With those observations to clarify the nature of my proposed xenophobic instinct, and instincts in general, let me take the final step which you should all now suspect. What allows authorities and governments to get peaceful citizens to fight wars, commit genocide, torture, and crimes against humanity yet believe they are justified in doing so, even though they may suffer Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and even complete emotional breakdown for having participated in acts they know full well to be atrocities? What allows even democratic regimes to incite radical nationalism — the flag-waving, troop-supporting blind adherence to an undertaking that can easily be seen to be a war of aggression? What enables prohibitionist governments to fight the so-called Drug War, whether honestly or for ulterior motives, and have the great majority of citizens support the effort?

It is, above all, the appeal to the citizenry's great weakness, that when an enemy has been defined, when an evil other, an outgroup identified, when a group, a class, a race, a country or even a substance has been labelled as a threat, even for the most preposterous and mendacious reasons, it is the xenophobic instinct in every person which can be easily and reliably activated so that a great number of those persons can then be led off on the most absurd and destructive of crusades, to commit crimes and atrocities of every sort.

America’s designated foes — and I single out America here not because it is alone in perpetrati...
characteristics that classed them as biophiles, those life-loving persons like Albert Schweitzer and Albert Einstein, incapable of being persuaded into supporting great collective crimes. The 70-80% of citizens in the middle, between the two extremes, apparently just blow with the wind, and follow whomever is shouting the loudest. It is of course the Hitlers, Himmlers, and other fascists of this world who know well the method to arouse the people by manufacturing a threat to the homeland, by defining an enemy, the evil outsiders who threaten our liberty, hate our freedoms, and they do shout very loudly about it. To some less-aware fascist types it just comes naturally, but it is obvious that the most crafty among them consciously know how to apply the method, how to make the people feel insecure and threatened by some class or group of outsiders, even if they don’t suspect it is thanks to the xenophobic instinct that the method works so well.

The biophiles, for better or worse, tend never to shout, nor even take a role in government. We find that the biophilic personality typically experiences an all-encompassing unity of life, the kind of experience that mystics seek after, and which some have experienced through the judicious use of psychedelics. The experience of unity, of oneness of all life, may, in fact, be the only effective antidote to the xenophobic instinct, for such an experience simply does not allow fascist rabble-rousers to define a class of outsiders, or separate people into a us-them dichotomy. If all of us are one, as the psychedelic experience can teach, who is the outsider?

References


7 See, for example, several papers supporting this view in Machiavellian Intelligence: Social Expertise and the Evolution of Intellect in Monkeys, Apes, and Humans. Richard Byrne and Andrew Whiten, editors. Oxford University Press 1988.


9 Alain Schmitt and Karl Grammer: “Social intelligence and success: Don’t be too clever in order to be smart” In Machiavellian Intelligence, above.