

Re: Aggression, human nature and paleopsychology

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Instincts are not good or bad in themselves but more or less appropriate to the environment in which they are activated. In this respect Freud's word "id," with its negative connotations, is unfortunate. Our instincts cause problems for us in today's world due to our no longer living in the environment in which they evolved. Human beings share with other animals instinctual inhibitions against killing members of our own species. Even Nazis spoke of the "special kind of courage" it took to murder unresisting men, women and children. More than other animals we may ignore or override instinctual inhibitions, but nature takes its toll. Iraqis and others have vomited at the sight of recent beheadings. Feelings of horror at killing takes its toll in Posttraumatic Stress Disorder among soldiers. Living in a stressed environment our instincts are also often not just regressed but disorganized and not developed. Fighting instincts which originally evolved to protect us from predators may emerge against members of our own species and effectively cancel our inhibitions against fighting. This is because when we are attacked we see the enemy as predators. It does not make sense to feel pity for those who want to kill us or kill our children. When we are attacked, or imagine we are attacked, or imagine we are threatened, an entirely different set of instincts is activated. Only later does horror and remorse set in when we realize that we have actually killed another human being. One soldier said he died a bit inside when he killed another person. (Psychopaths don't feel this way, but they possess a disorganized instinct structure. I'm talking about someone with normal emotional development who can still kill because at the time the "enemy" is not sensed as being human.) What we call "civilization" involves a reaction against warfare that is also, in part, instinctual. Remarkably Freud made this point in his article "Why War?" Why, then, do people fight and kill each other so much? We have powerful fighting instincts going back to a time when our ancestors were prey and our best (or only) defense against predation was to fight. Then there were more than a million years of a hunting adaptation in which old fighting impulses were brought into the service of hunting and never fully neutralized. When hunting large animals was no longer possible, and free movement across large

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territories was restricted, the old fighting impulses started to be expressed in war. "Civilization" represents an attem