



War as the Autoimmune Disease of Humanity: Perspectives on a Theoretical Proposal

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Abstract: In this essay two seemingly distant domains are linked together: a particular issue in international security (warfare) and a group of diseases that are related to the abnormal functioning of the human immune system (autoimmune disorders). First an analogy is introduced between the individual and the collective human body (i.e. humanity) by elaborating basic definitions in both fields of study (war – peace, health – disease) through etymological research, and correspondences are drawn between particular forms of warfare and specific autoimmune diseases. The second half of the paper touches upon existing theories on the causes of war within the two bodies and aims to offer a potential cure for the autoimmune disease of humanity.

Keywords: *International Security, War, Theory of War, Immunology, Autoimmune diseases.*

“Our fate is shaped from within ourselves outward,
never from without inward.”

(Jacques Lusseyran)

Introduction

This brief essay aims to elaborate my definition of war based on the analogy between the individual and the collective body of human beings. This definition is the following: *war is the autoimmune disease of humanity*. Drawing a correlation between the state and the human body is not a new phenomenon: the so-called body politics was a popular metaphor in the medieval era. Thomas Hobbes, one of the most influential political theorists of the seventeenth century, used connections between the political and medical thought in his magnum opus, *Leviathan*. Political diseases described by Hobbes included epilepsy (a conflict between the spiritual and civil authority) and pleurisy (a great concentration of the state resources in the hands of just a few individuals) among other afflictions.¹

1 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 220.

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ISSN - 2464-9929, © ARISS, Global Politics Review, <http://www.globalpoliticsreview.com>

The idea of such correspondences dates back to the legendary Hermes Trismegistus (“Thrice Greatest Hermes”) who postulated a divine analogy between the microcosm and the macrocosm in his cryptic work entitled Emerald Tablet: “What is above is like what is below. What is below is like what is above.”² While followers of the Hermetic tradition explored the mystical analogies in domains such as alchemy and astrology³, Hobbes used this all-encompassing paradigm to analyze the relationship between the human political construct and the human body.

Definitions – War and Peace in the Two Bodies

Firstly, I argue that in analogy with the normal state (i.e. health) of the individual human body, the normal condition of the collective body of humans (i.e. humanity) is peace. This is a controversial statement, because notable thinkers had diametrically opposed opinions. For example, the aforementioned Hobbes’ position was that

the *status naturalis* of mankind was a *status hostilis* resulting in a ‘bellum omnium contra omnes’ (war of all against all). As the reasons for this state of affairs he [Hobbes] identified competition as well as the universal human motives of diffidence, glory and power (‘I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire for power after power, that ceaseth only in death’). Most philosophers (Spinoza, Locke, Kant) and the founders of international law (such as Grotius) did not envisage peace as the natural state of mankind.⁴

However, certain anthropologists share my view. According to Margaret Mead, the institution of war is a cultural invention that can be abolished, so it is not a biological necessity to kill one another on a grand scale. Harry Holbert Turney-High wrote that “cold-blooded slaughter has really never been approved by the bulk of mankind. All have understood the amenities of peace to a greater or less degree. Peace, then, seems to be the normal situation in the minds of even warlike peoples.”⁵ R. Brian Ferguson also supports this idea by stating that:

Even if we focus on societies where warfare is an undisputed occurrence, periods of active warfare involving a given group usually are relatively brief. The vast majority of humans, living or dead, have spent most of their lives at peace. So one can agree with Hobbes that politically autonomous groups have the potential for war, but this tells us nothing about why

2 Idries Shah, *The Sufis* (London: Octagon, 1977), 198.

3 For an accurate and detailed definition of terms such as Hermeticism, alchemy and astrology, consult the standard academic reference edited by Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

4 Johan M. G. van der Dennen, *The Origin of War* (Groeningen: Origin Press, 1995), 60.

5 Harry Holbert Turney-High, *Primitive War: Its Practice and Concepts* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1949), quoted in van der Dennen, *The Origin of War*, 508.

real war occurs. Contrary to the Hobbesian image, peace is the normal human condition⁶

I emphasize that peace is the balanced state of humanity. The meaning of the Anglo-French word *pes*, (derived from the Latin *pax*) is freedom from disorder. This word replaced the Old English *frið* which also meant happiness.⁷ Correspondingly, health, derived from the Old English *hælp* referred to “wholeness” that encompassed not only physical well-being, but also happiness and prosperity.⁸ In contrast, disease means the lack of ease: discomfort, distress and inconvenience. It is an abnormal condition, an impairment of the normal state of a living being. Disease indicates the disruption of the default equilibrium of the body and suggests that the ease by which life is generally lived becomes blocked.

Although modern Western medicine does not consider balance an important concept of health due to its mechanistic views, both the ancient Indian and traditional Chinese medical systems agree on the centrality of harmony within the body. In his seminal text on Ayurveda, Todd Caldecott describes that “from an Ayurvedic perspective health is defined as the equilibrium between the *dosas* [three elemental substances or bodily humours], *dhatu*s [seven basic tissues or principles of structure] and *malas* [waste products of the body].”⁹ According to Jerry Alan Johnson, traditional Chinese medicine stipulates that “through exposure to either adverse environmental conditions, stress and emotional tension, or poor nutrition, an imbalance is created in the physiological matrix resulting in illness.”¹⁰ Another renowned authority, Giovanni Maciocia also emphasizes that “Chinese medicine stresses balance as a key to health: between rest and exercise, in diet, in sexual activity, and in climate. Any long-term imbalance can become a cause of disease.”¹¹

According to Levy & Thompson, war can be defined as “sustained, coordinated violence between political organizations.”¹² It is especially fruitful to compare the original meaning of war with the definition and the cause of autoimmune diseases. The late Old English *werre* (large-scale military conflict) originates from the Frankish *werra* that has a Proto-Indo-European verb stem (*wers-*).¹³ *Wers-* means to mix up or confuse.¹⁴

6 R. Brian Ferguson, “Anthropology and War: Theory, Politics, Ethics,” in *The Anthropology of War and Peace: Perspectives on the Nuclear Age*, eds. David Pitt and Paul R. Turner (London: Greenwood Press, 1989), 152, quoted in van der Dennen, *The Origin of War*, 508.

7 “Online Etymology Dictionary,” accessed April 20, 2015, http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=peace&allowed_in_frame=0

8 Ibid.

9 Todd Caldecott, *Ayurveda: The Divine Science of Life* (Philadelphia: Elsevier, 2006), 93.

10 Jerry Alan Johnson, *Chinese Medical Qigong Therapy Volume 3: Differential Diagnosis, Clinical Foundations, Treatment Principles and Clinical Protocols* (Pacific Grove: The International Institute of Medical Qigong, 2002), 3.

11 Giovanni Maciocia, *The Foundations of Chinese Medicine: A Comprehensive Text for Acupuncturists and Herbalists* (New York: Churchill Livingstone, 2005), 237.

12 Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, *Causes of War* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 5.

13 “Online Etymology Dictionary,” accessed April 21, 2015, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=war>

14 For example, the current German verb “verwirren” (to confuse, perplex) derives from this ancient stem.

The Encyclopedia of Autoimmune Diseases defines autoimmune disease as the following:

The basic definition of an autoimmune disease is a disorder caused by an autoimmune response, i.e. an immune response directed against something in the body of the patient. The word auto is the Greek word for self. The immune system is a complicated network of cells and cell components that normally work to defend the body and eliminate infections caused by bacteria, viruses, and other invading microbes. If a person has an autoimmune disease, the immune system mistakenly attacks the self, targeting the cells, tissues, and organs of a person's own body.¹⁵

When the human immune system turns into a self-destructive mode, in this confused state it mixes up the healthy cells with harmful bacteria or viruses, and wages war against the self in the absence of any detectable microbial assault. This *tragic misidentification*, just like the ancient verb stem *wers-* suggests, is not only the cause of autoimmune diseases in the individual body but also constitutes the very root of war that happens in the collective body. Failing to recognize other humans as fellow cells within the living organism we call humanity is the source of all violence and warfare. Politician and author Norman Angell, recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1933, had this insight in mind when he wrote that:

Mankind as a whole represents the organism and the planet the environment, to which he is more and more adapting himself, is the only conclusion that consorts with the facts. [...] The completer the co-operation, the greater the vitality; the more imperfect the cooperation, the less the vitality. Now a body, the various parts of which are so interdependent that without co-ordination vitality is reduced or death ensues, must be regarded, in so far as those functions are concerned, *not as a collection of rival organisms, but as one* [my emphasis]. This is in accord with what we know of the character of living organisms in their conflict with environment. The higher the organism, the greater the elaboration and interdependence of its parts, the greater the need for co-ordination.¹⁶

If we consider cells as citizens, tissues as cities, organs as countries and the human body as humanity itself, various correspondences may be discovered with the nearly one hundred different autoimmune diseases. These diseases can affect the body in different ways. If the autoimmune reaction is directed against a certain organ (like intestines in the case of Crohn's disease or the brain in multiple sclerosis), we may call it an interstate war. Type 1 diabetes mellitus destroys only the insulin-producing cells of the pancreas – this is comparable to an ethnic war. Systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE)

15 Dana K. Cassell and Noel R. Rose, *The Encyclopedia of Autoimmune Diseases* (New York: Facts on File, 2003), 30.

16 Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion – A Study of the Relation of Military Power in Nations to Their Economic and Social Advantage* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1910), 162-163.

is analogous to a world war given that the immune system carries out attacks against many tissues and organs at the same time such as the heart, liver, kidneys, lungs, skin and/or joints. Ultimately, using this theoretical framework, autoimmune diseases and all wars may be considered civil wars where fellow cells within the individual body/fellow citizens within the collective body physically liquidate each other on a large scale.

Causes of War in the Two Bodies

Neither researchers of autoimmune diseases nor scholars of war could come to a universal consensus as to the causes of internal/external warfare. Of course, many theories exist in both areas. Cassel and Rose mention genetic predisposition and an environmental trigger that may lead to the development of an autoimmune disease.¹⁷ Top medical experts in the field of immunology extend the potential variables with “a large portion of chance. Mechanisms that could result in chance events include environmental influences, somatic mutations, and random receptor mutations.”¹⁸

Philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, historians, anthropologists, political scientists, biologists and economists have produced a wide range of theories, but they “debate not only what the causes of war are, but also what theoretical approaches and methodologies are best suited to identifying those causes.”¹⁹ According to Greg Cashman, several theories have been validated by real events and therefore can be considered worthy of closer attention. Such theories include those that “emphasize changes in dyadic or systemic balances of capabilities, theories that focus on the effects of various kinds of political unrest and the political vulnerability of political elites, theories that address state-to-nation imbalances, and the steps-to-war theory that incorporates the critical factors of territorial disputes, dyadic rivalries, and conflict spirals.”²⁰

Following the example of autoimmune diseases, the main cause of warfare is a misidentification, i.e. perceiving a fellow cell within humanity as the Other. Although the actors of war are political organizations (following Levy & Thompson’s definition of war), individuals are the ones who do the actual fighting to advance the interests of the leadership of a particular political organization. In the case of warfare, the interest of the leadership and the fighting individuals rarely correlate. Consequently, the political elite must convince the public that liquidating fellow cells within the collective body is the only option left to resolve an ongoing conflict.

Here ideology plays the most crucial role. State ideology is disseminated to the people via various propaganda organs. The false framework of “us vs. them” is established by magnifying the differences between human beings (race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, political opinion, membership of a particular social group etc.) while willfully ignoring

17 Cassel and Rose, *The Encyclopedia of Autoimmune Diseases*, 31.

18 Ian R. Mackay and Noel R. Rose, *The Autoimmune Diseases* (St. Louis: Elsevier, 2006), xxiii.

19 Levy and Thompson, *Causes of War*, 2.

20 Greg Cashman, *What Causes War?* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 477.

the fact that we are equally important and valuable cells within humanity. *Divide et impera* (“divide and conquer”) is an ancient Latin maxim that was widely used in every historical era. In the twentieth and twenty-first century we witnessed narratives based on binary opposites such as Aryan vs. Jew (World War II), communist vs. capitalist (Cold War) and terrorist vs. peace-loving citizen (War on Terror). Creating an image of the enemy (the Other) and instilling fear in the public are classic examples of the propaganda machine specifically designed to manufacture an ideology based on division. Dutch psychologist Joost A. M. Meerloo elaborates that

fear and catastrophe fortify the need to identify with a strong leader. They lead to herding together of people, who shy away from wanting to be individual cells any longer; they prefer to be part of a huge mystic social organization that protects against threat and distress, in oneness with the leader. This protection-seeking instinctual reaction is also directed against dissent and individualism, against the individual ego.²¹

The “father of public relations”, Edward Bernays, whose work was carefully studied by Joseph Goebbels, wrote the following lines about propaganda in 1928:

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. In almost every act of our lives, whether in the sphere of politics or business, in our social conduct or our ethical thinking, we are dominated by the relatively small number of persons [...] who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses. It is they who pull the wires that control the public mind, who harness old social forces and contrive new ways to bind and guide the world.²²

A Potential Cure for the Autoimmune Disease of Humanity

As I stated before, the healthy state of humanity is peaceful coexistence and cooperation. Although the increasing destructiveness of military technology reduced the incentives of major powers to fight large-scale wars, we still see significant amount of warfare in the world. These developments suggest that the general quality of consciousness of humanity is rather low. Identifying a fellow cell as an enemy because it lives in another organ (cf. nationality), looks like a red blood cell instead of a white one (cf. race), believes in the heart instead of the brain (cf. religion), and follows the kidney instead of the gall bladder (cf. political affiliation), is not the characteristic of an efficient, well-organized, low-entropy system.

I suggest that the top-down approach toward peaceful coexistence does not work as the

21 Joost A. M. Meerloo, *The Rape of the Mind – The Psychology of Thought Control, Menticide, and Brainwashing* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1956), 127.

22 Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: IG Publishing, 2004), 37-38.

failure of the Kellogg-Briand pact (1928) demonstrated.²³ The potentially more effective bottom-up design (eradicating ignorance one person at a time by identifying the Other as an equal unit within the collective body) may lead to a quantum leap in the consciousness of humanity that will result in – among others – the total absence of warfare based on the realization of our interconnectedness and essential oneness. The reason why the so-called Golden Rule of every major world religion stipulates to treat others the way we would like to be treated is because every individuated unit is part of the whole (i.e. humanity, and ultimately, the Self). Given that the Self (the Absolute that is commonly referred to as Tao in Taoism, Brahman in Hinduism, God in Christianity, Yahweh in Judaism and Allah in Islam) consists of everything and everybody (the four elements, the mineral kingdom, the plant kingdom, the animal kingdom and the human kingdom), harming the Other is literally harming the Self – myself. The only possible explanation behind damaging the Other is the lack of recognition that there is no Other: everything and everybody is part of the Self.

I have already cited the traditional, holistic medical wisdom of India and China, and in conclusion, I describe their ideal, healthy version of humanity that is found in their ancient sacred scriptures. The Chinese people call this peaceful state of being *tianxia datong* (“grand harmony all under Heaven”). Tan Chung writes that

in the classic of Liji (Book of Rites) there is the famous passage generally called *datongpian* (Essay on Grand Harmony) which is one of the hallmarks of Chinese civilization. The Essay depicts the utopia of the ancients which is a society governed by the most virtuous and capable people. There is no unrest, robbery, theft, machination, and people do not need to close their doors when they sleep at night.²⁴

The Indian wisdom tradition refers to the ideal state of the collective body as *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (“the world is one family”). This concept originates from the classic Vedic text *Maha Upanishad*: “Only small men discriminate saying: One is a relative; the other is a stranger. For those who live magnanimously the entire world constitutes but a family.”²⁵

Immense financial, natural and human resources are directed at warfare, even though one trivial realization on a mass scale would result in the total cessation of all hostilities. This realization is that every Other (the so-called “enemy”) is in actuality a fellow cell, because regardless of the superficial differences these very units comprise the living organism we call humanity. The healthy, peaceful, cooperative state of humanity needs to

23 This international pact renounced war as an instrument of national policy. Eventually it proved to be an inefficient multilateral treaty that did not make any tangible contribution to international peace. See the full text here: <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/imt/kbpact.htm>

24 Tan Chung, *Himalaya Calling – The Origins of China and India* (Hackensack: World Century Publishing, 2015), 73-74.

25 “Maha Upanishad VI:71-73(a),” accessed 23 April, 2015, http://www.celextel.org/upanishads/sama_veda/maha.html

be every responsible human being's concern. **GPR**

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