

Collective Violence as the Satisfaction of the Ego's Aggressive Instinct

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Abstract. This paper reinterprets collective violence as the satisfaction of the ego's aggressive instinct, moving beyond the entrenched dichotomy of biological determinism and social constructionism. Against the "by-product hypothesis", which interprets coalitional killing as a cultural artifact or rational strategy, this paper exposes this view as a moralistic fallacy, an ideological attempt to renounce humanity's forbidden knowledge of its own aggressivity. What is often cited as proof of an "innate aversion" to killing—the initial revulsion of perpetrators—is here revealed as a symptom of the civilizing process: guilt and the vigilance of the superego transform instinctual repression into disgust. In modern warfare, what appears as rational duty or institutional obedience is reinterpreted here as a veiled form of instinctual satisfaction: "dark fun" disguised in moral rationalization. Therefore, collective violence is neither a Darwinian compulsion nor a cultural contingency, but civilization's negotiation with a repressed drive that incessantly seeks expression through sanctioned forms. By unveiling the aggressive instinct beneath civilization's ethical veneer, this paper illuminates how collective violence is a primordial epiphany disguised as rational duty. The conclusion insists that the way forward lies not in denial of this instinct but in its sublimation, i.e., in transforming destructive energies into activities that preserve life, transcend the self, and create values.

Keywords: Collective Violence, Aggressive Instinct, Freud, Civilization

1. Introduction

Collective violence, also referred to as coalitional aggression or group aggression, occurs when humans of one "group" engage in aggressive behavior against those of another "group" based on their collective identity [1]. The notion of "group" does not have to be geographically defined; it is psychological othering that determines the boundary: the victims, not necessarily the outsider in the physical sense, are psychologically discriminated as the Other, some incompatible xenos of territorial, ethnical, political, or ideological difference, whatsoever be their nominal relations to the aggressors. It is evident that various forms of collective violence in human history, ranging from the Crusades, the Mongol conquests, and Spain's colonization of the New World, to Nazi genocide and the Holocaust, the planned campaigns in Rwanda, and the Bosnian armed conflicts, are contextualized in dramatically different social, cultural, and historical mise-en-scènes. Hence this paper will not examine the processes behind the multiply realized instances; it is the general

phenomenon itself—the capacity for one group of humans with social substantiality to direct systematic violence against others—that demands explanation in regard to a controversy: whether it is an evolutionary legacy with Darwinian foundations or an ecological product emerging under social circumstances.

This has been the acute polarity between biological determinism and social constructionism. A recent trend in the natural and social science literature has been to resist the former in favor of the latter by treating coalitional killing as a by-product, rather than an attribute favored by natural selection, of the Darwinian processes in human evolutionary history. However, instead of being committed to the naive nature/nurture dichotomy, this paper will explain the genesis of collective violence with the ego's aggressive instinct from a perspective of Freudian psychoanalysis. The theorization of collective violence as a by-product succumbs to moralistic fallacy by negating the "evil" in human nature and deflecting humans from the forbidden knowledge. The hypothesis itself is a reflection of the ego's renunciation of instinctual satisfaction in the development of civilization. Nevertheless, in civilization's later stage, the aggressive instinct is still satisfied with its outward manifestation veiled in rational decision-making.

2. A critical examination the by-product hypothesis

Paul Roscoe advanced the by-product hypothesis to undermine adverse position exemplified by Richard Wrangham's "dominance-drive" hypothesis: the evolutionary origin of human collective violence is related to the emotional predisposition in adult male chimpanzees to seek inter-group dominance when power imbalances exist between opponent groups, which can advance fitness by bringing reproductive resources and opportunities. Conversely, Roscoe contended for an "innate aversion" to conspecific killing with evolutionary roots in "ritualized" encounters—fights that do not pursue to a lethal end—between evenly matched opponent groups in human progenitors indicating "the presence of a mechanism" that disinclines our progenitors from killing conspecifics [2]. In lieu of a dominance drive, coalitional killing results from developed intelligence, the cognitive capacity for calculating the benefits of killing and for simultaneously devising cultural, psychological strategies to short-circuit the original emotional aversion. Humans, in short, merely "learn" to become a homicidal species. Yet, plausible as it may be, the by-product theory is untenable.

It is unnecessary to commit to the false dichotomy between biological determinism and social constructionism. In other words, it is possible to reject social constructionism without embracing the biological deterministic position. The problem of coalitional killing can be approached from a new, psychoanalytic perspective. The aggressive instinct is a crucial Freudian concept in this context. As the "original, self-sustaining instinctual disposition in man," it is Thanatos (the death instinct) directed towards external objects—things other than the Self—whose satisfaction affords the ego something like a "fulfillment of [its] old wishes for omnipotence [3]." It is not that humans are "compelled" by genetic factors to kill, but that humans satisfy the aggressive instinct in the action of killing. The aggressive instinct can be compared with sexual desire: it would be strange to observe that sexual behavior is automatically activated by anatomical structure regardless of the ecological or cultural environment. The aggressive instinct, not unlike sexual desire, can be controlled or repressed on both individual and social levels: civilization is in fact built on the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction [3]. Hence biological determinism is false. But it would be fallacious to deny the role of the aggressive instinct in lethal collective violence.

Roscoe's by-product hypothesis succumbs to moralistic fallacy, the faulty inference from claims on the moral aversion to coalitional killing is to claims on the natural aversion to coalitional killing.

Such false-consciousness—a leap from the ought to is, from the deontological imperatives to the ontological statements—is not really the result of a crude blunder in inference, but rather a studied design to achieve some purpose. Roscoe’s ulterior motive, like that of some of today’s scholars, is to orient people away from the forbidden knowledge. The Seville Statement on Violence (1986), fashioned for the International Year of Peace and adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), proclaims that “war or any other violent behavior”, being a mere cultural artifact, is not “genetically programmed into our human nature [4].” An example par excellence of the moralistic fallacy, it has been criticized as “the subordination of scholarly integrity to an ideological cause [5].” Its solemn promulgation “IT IS SCIENTIFICALLY INCORRECT to say ...” should have been rephrased as “IT IS POLITICALLY INCORRECT to say .. [4].” The grain of the hypothesis, despite its difference from unscientific slogans, is congenial to the Seville Statement. By disjointing collective violence from “instinct”, it attempts to exclude the inclination to aggression from human consciousness: there exists instead an “innate aversion”, one of the “genetically based, emotional impediments,” to conspecific killing [2]. As the product the cognitive faculty, intelligence, coalitional killing is therefore conditioned by the hypothesis on rational choice. It becomes more convenient to place responsibility on the human race to contribute to World Peace. The by-product hypothesis surrenders scientific interpretations to ideological ideals with a motivation to deflect humans from forbidden knowledge adverse to the latter’s progress.

The evidence in the by-product hypothesis is invalid as empirical support. Roscoe considers the involvement of Reserve Police Battalion 101 (RPB 101) in Nazi’s Final Solution to be testimony “sufficiently robust to raise serious questions about the validity of the dominance drive hypothesis [2].” The massacre of Jewish citizens in Poland between 1942 and 1943 by “ordinary” men—few of whom were Nazi fanatics—was executed with “a marked aversion” in the beginning [2]. “Almost all of them—at least initially—were horrified and disgusted:” only later did they become “efficient and calloused executioners” [2]. Granted that their initial reaction was the hypothesis’s innate aversion, after they “learned” to become genocidal, battalion members would have merely become desensitized, not emotionally disposed, to killing, with strategies devised to short-circuit the aversion as one of the “genetically based, emotional impediments” [2]. However, the picture of “Jewish hunts” volunteered by battalion members had been “an enthusiastic aspiration for operations” [6]. Those who form the nucleus of the battalion were zealous to kill. Developing the concept of “dark fun”, a communal form of hedonic cruelty, Fine and Corte indicates that cruelties in “Nazi concentration camps” were pleasurable “within institutions of total control” by a solidarist brotherly crew [7]. Therefore, the initial reaction of RPB 101 evidence is not the innate aversion: some battalion members, emotionally disposed to the execution, did find the latter emotionally enjoyable.

3. The by-product hypothesis in the process of civilization and instinctual renunciation

The position to further deny hedonic cruelty as “innate” in humans still does not validate the RPB 101 evidence as empirical support of the by-product theory. In his book *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, Pinker Steven argues that sadism, which involves taking pleasure in cruelty as distinct from one’s being “desensitized to violence,” is “an acquired taste” [8], invoking Roy Baumeister’s explanation of sadism in opponent-process terms as a revulsion-overcoming. Alternatively, the individual first undergoes the A process, visceral revulsion to harmdoing, but, with repeated experiences, the B process, a reassuring counteremotion to reinstate one’s equilibrium, overcomes revulsion and tilts the entire process toward a hedonic, even euphoric, state [9]. Pinker, unlike Baumeister, who neutrally explains the individual’s psychological process, is

biased by its overemphasis on the “acquiredness” of sadism, maintaining that “government torturers” follow a “counterintuitive career trajectory” [8]. Yet, however plausible this proposition sounds, it is false. Had it been true that enjoyable torment “must be cultivated” in humans, who “gradually... start to enjoy it” [8], untrained children would have been revulsed by hedonic cruelty. But collective effervescence accompanies the voluntary act of brutality: “I recall at least one occasion when four or five of us kids decided to drop kittens from the top of staked bales in a barn hayloft to see if they would land on their feet. We watched with excited glee as one kitten after another twisted and turned while falling to the floor below [10].”

As Cahill admits, this was but one of his “childish cruelties” in frolics with his childhood friends, such as shooting BBs at “every living form, including an occasional human, just to see how they would react if hit [10].” It is crucial that this tendency to “dark fun” becomes invisible in the adulthood of Cahill and his childhood friends, none of whom are “violent sociopaths”: Cahill, a law-abiding citizen and an animal-loving vegetarian, is uninterested even in hinting at interpersonal aggression or watching “violent mayhem” in mass media [10]. The phenomenon about children’s behavioral deviance from the civil adult norm leaves open the possibility, contra Pinker’s proposition with which one validates the RPB 101 evidence, that the disinclination to hedonic cruelty might be an acquired and cultivated taste.

Ironically, Pinker’s rejection of the “innateness” of hedonic cruelty is also problematized by Baumeister’s psychological model invoked by him. Baumeister postulates guilt as “the moderator” that deters the B process that makes harmdoing pleasant from predominating. Freud traces the genesis of guilt in relationship with the instinctual renunciation of aggressivity. The prototype of guilt is the fear of punishment by an external authority. The ego feels guilty, or “socially” anxious, for satisfying the aggressive instinct, which the authority will discover. But after the establishment of the superego, an internal authority in identification with the external one, the ego now experiences what is properly called “bad conscience” for merely having the aggressive instinct, under the superego’s surveillance [3]. Guilt, to use Pinker’s word, has been “cultivated”. The sense of guilt is a sign and symptom of civilization, built on instinctual renunciation [3]. It is this cultural symptom, rather than the A process, that deters the perpetrators to embrace euphoria in Baumeister’s model. A crucial imbalance exists between the A process and the B process owing to guilt’s indispensable role: sadism is the B process’s final triumph over the A process, but the normal condition is the A process’s reliance on guilt for its final resistance to the B process. Had it not been for guilt, all perpetrators would have been benefited from the B process, i.e., found harmdoing pleasant. Baumeister’s implication that hedonic cruelty can and only can be prevented by cultivation goes athwart to Pinker’s position that hedonic cruelty can and only can be produced by cultivation.

The initial revulsion of battalion members is not an innate mechanism, but a symptom of the civilizing process. This reaction can be explained in light of civilization within the opponent-process model. Guilt will be first considered in its original sense as the fear of an external authority [3]. Guilt is inimical to the B process: the ego’s vital need for instinctual satisfaction. The revulsion in the A process, a seemingly visceral, physical reaction, does not yet exist in this stage. In civilization’s incipience, guilt (or “social” anxiety) keeps the B process in subordination: the ego renounces instinctual satisfaction owing to the fear. As civilization advances, repression is not only the refrain from satisfaction, but also the turning against the instinct itself. The ego is repelled by its own aggressivity, abhorring the latter like how devout Christians in the past did with sexuality. The disgust reaction in the A process thus arises from guilt—now the state of “bad conscience” for fear of the superego, the internal authority—against the B process, the primordial, natural tendency excluded from consciousness as ego-threatening. Now the partaking in killing transgresses what

Norbert Elias calls “our threshold of repugnance” [11]. The initial reaction of battalion members —“horror and shame” [2], like the “discomfort and embarrassment” in the discussion of bodily functions, is “one of the symptoms of the civilizing process” [11]. Therefore, the revulsion is not the ego’s instinctual manifestation, but the individual’s identification with the superego, whose command becomes her “wish”, her “instinct”, and what appears natural.

The by-product hypothesis itself is civilization’s recent attempt at renouncing the aggressive instinct by means of “instinct-removal”. As already mentioned, the hypothesis disjoins aggressivity from instinct by attributing the latter to a cognitive faculty and thus placing responsibility on humanity to keep it under rational control. This *modus operandi* marks civilization’s later stage. The desire of the ego, the instinctual satisfaction of aggressiveness, becomes a contra-instinct, enforced by practical reason and dependent on contingencies of the ecological and social environment. The command of the superego, the moral impermissibility of killing, becomes the “instinct” itself, the biology of the human and other species, and the innate mechanism in evolutionary legacy and genes. The similar attempts at renouncing aggressivity can also be found in Richard Rorty’s philosophy and the majority of psychological analysis, “treating cruelty as psychiatric disorder” and “psychopathology” [7]. The pathologization and denormalization of aggressivity explains why not only the action of, but also the wish for, and even the hint of interest in cruelty will be automatically labeled as “psychopathic” by the vulgar consciousness—a crucial sign of the increasing severity and intolerance of conscience in the superego. Both the by-product theory and the psycho-normalizing literature aim to denaturalize aggressivity by treating it as something contrary to human biology or detrimental to mental health. Yet the scenario was different in the earlier period of the civilizing process, in the late Middle Ages. The sin of cruel tyranny by the Violent against Neighbors had milder punishment in the Seventh Circle of the Hell than the sin fraud and malice in Dante’s *The Inferno*. Whereas the saturnalia of killings for a 14th -century figure had been unrestrained passion of the bestial-human, it is treated as the choice against genetic heredity by the by-product hypothesis or the symptom of personality disorder by the psycho-normalizing literature [12]; before, aggressivity was demoralized, but it is now denaturalized. The by-product hypothesis, being itself a late symptom of instinctual renunciation under the culture’s superego, is inside civilization’s move from ought—the restrain from satisfaction—toward is—the exclusion from consciousness.

4. Instinctual satisfaction in the form of moralized rationality

The hypothesis’s removal of instinct from aggressivity—i.e., the attribution of its origin to intelligence, the cognitive ability to calculate the benefits of aggression—has affinities with the contention that war is not caused by “instincts”, but by reason, practical or moral. This contention is supported with recourse to the systematic, organizational, routinized, and institutionalized nature of modern warfare. The Seville Statement on Violence declares the “scientific incorrectness” to see instincts as the cause of war, claiming that modern warfare emerges as a transition “from the primacy of emotional and motivational factors...called ‘instincts’...to the primacy of cognitive factors,” because it “involves the institutional use of personal characteristics of obedience, suggestibility, and idealism, social skills such as language, and rational considerations such as cost-calculation, planning, and information processing” [4]. Robert Hinde, with moral reason in mind, emphasizes what he calls “the duty to kill”: each incumbent plays his or her part in institutionalized war, without personal choice, because “killing is seen as necessary simply as a duty” [13]. When regarded as “the need to obey orders in the service of a higher goal,” duty can be “elevated to the status of a moral precept in opposition to the prohibition on killing [13].” However, scholars who dismiss instinct in collective violence are deceived by its rationalized manifestations, mistaking the

form of its manifestation for its genesis. The following analysis will critically scrutinize the contention above while examining the nature of instinctual satisfaction and highlighting how the ego can still satisfy its aggressive instinct after the pacification of the civilizing process.

The Seville Statement does not confront the proposition that warfare is caused by any “instinct”: it confounds how war originates with what war entails. The phrase “modern war involves” flagrantly betrays the confusion on which the reasoning is based [4]. No one doubts the entailment of “social skills” and “rational considerations such as cost-calculation, planning, and information-processing” in human warfare, which is by nature systematic and organizational [4]. But the Seville Statement does not explain how and why these cognitive elements may be considered, rather counterintuitively, as the cause of war. These elements are surely not unique to “modern war”: the military tactics to outwit and outmaneuver one’s enemy were catalogued in the 5th-century BCE ancient Chinese text *The Art of War*. Likewise, “the institutional use of personal characteristics of obedience, suggestibility, and idealism”—such as indoctrination in military training—is entailed in both ancient and modern war. But the cause, the origin, or the genesis of war is left unexplained. The Seville Statement merely enumerates a few of cognitive elements entailed in war after the formation of civilization.

The nature of the satisfaction of the ego’s aggressive instinct can thus be dissected with a deeper insight. The thesis “war is caused by the aggressive instinct” should be restated as “the ego satisfies its aggressive instinct in war.” The causal claim spells the misconception that the caused war must be emotional and impulsive, in the sense of “affective aggression”, the infliction of harm for its own sake, automatically activated and genetically controlled [2]. However, the satisfaction of the aggressive instinct is not “automatic”, based on passive reactivity to internal or external stimuli of self-injury; it is an active will for “control over nature”, viz., over objects [3]. Rational deliberation and cold calculation, including “Machiavellian” intelligence, can surely be exerted in the course of action. Self-gain is central to the action, but not in the sense of “instrumental aggression”, the infliction of harm for external goals, which can be achieved by means other than the infliction [2]. The enjoyment of Freudian instinctual freedom is neither affective nor instrumental. It makes no sense to divide the manifestation of the aggressive instinct into two agencies: “means” (the infliction of harm per se) and “end” (“goals” belonging to different categories), making the ego either desire the former or desire the latter. The satisfaction does not constitute an either/or of choice between the “harm for harm’s sake” and “the obligation to harm”. Rather, “means” and “end” are within one continuum of the action. The ego is not fascinated with death and destruction per se, but with the Other’s downfall in contrast to the Self’s fuller existence as the increase of power. Freud considers the aggressive instinct as Thanatos (the death instinct) in the service of Eros (the life instinct), observing that “the blindest fury of destructiveness” is “accompanied by an extraordinarily high degree of narcissistic enjoyment” [3]. The aggressive instinct can be interpreted as the egoistic desire for hegemony, the will to compete. Its fulfillment is the Self’s manifestation of life, power, fullness, and exaltation, with inwardly directed love and outwardly directed hate, in the Other’s death, destruction, privation, and humiliation. The Self, like the Other, is community-defined in this paper: the “we” antagonistically demarcated from the “them”.

Hinde’s position that “post-industrial” war has nothing to do with aggressivity is based on the rudimentary mistake of tracing the cause of war in how combatants are ordered by the institutional power, instead of in why the institutional power orders combatants. If combatants are stirred into fighting by propaganda portraying the enemy as the subhuman, the animal, or the micro-predator, Hinde will conclude that propagandist dehumanization is the cause of war, without investigating into the “why” of propagandist dehumanization; the cause of war still remains unexamined and

unexplained. Hinde paradoxically sought the cause of war in soldiers who, according to him, are forced to “abide by ... laws” and “obey the orders of [their] superiors” [13], with no investigation into the “why” behind and beyond. It is the same mistake to support the claim—aggressiveness is not the *causa fiendi* of “post-industrial” war—with records about combatants’ lack individual aggressiveness: the helplessness, the desperate struggles for survival, the traumatic experience with grisly details of death [13]. Evidently, those soldiers suffer. They are not aggressors; they are victims of war. Hinde’s argument not only displays a lack of synoptic grasp of the scenario, but is also a change of subject: we are interested in how the Self’s instinct for life and power is satisfied in the Other’s destruction, not in how the Self (in the individual sense) is threatened with destruction, the privation of life and power. Hence Hinde’s argument does not stand.

The question remains on how the ego can satisfy its aggressive instinct in modernized global civilization. The answer is simple: with the superego’s permission. It is crucial that “duty” is not the reason of, but rather the license to, “dark fun”. It is not that perpetrators think “the duty to obey the orders of [their] superiors,” “firmly incorporated in [their] self-concept,” “must take precedence over [their] scruples” [13]. Whoever consider the ordinary Germans as the “victims of the Nazi bureaucracy” coerced into complying to superior orders are blessed with the simplicity to accept the Nuremberg defense [6]. True, the performance of one’s duty has been effected by the categorical imperatives of the punitive authority with whom the ego has not identified. The moral idea of “ought”, for Nietzsche, was branded in people’s memory by spectacles of cruelty in a community, to which people were indebted [14]. In a similar strain, Freud traces the origin of conscience to the fear of the primal father’s punishment, a display of his own privilege. Such is the genealogy of “duty”, i.e., how it originates historically. Yet, theoretically, the relationship can be reversed: the punishment of others no longer enforces duty; rather, duty licenses the punishment on others. In the case of “ordinary” Germans, two authorities are concerned: their superego and the governmental regime. The superego, the internal identification with the social order in outside evaluations, connives at the ego’s instinctual satisfaction under reward and incentives of the overarching local institution. Fine and Corte emphasizes “the crucial paradox” of “dark fun” by interpreting it as “a Janus-faced time of morality and a time out from morality”: both a commitment to local values and an abolition of social regulations [7]. But the contradiction between morality and immorality is merely illusory. The real image is primordial irrationality in the form of civilized rationality, “chaos” concealed in “order”: it is instinctual satisfaction as one’s “duty”. “Dark fun”, cruelty draped in morality, has to be perceived as the abyss beneath the veil. Nevertheless, the “embrace of local ethics” is not the essence of “dark fun”: perpetrators do not have to find their deed morally justified to effervesce at cruelty [7]. The nature of instinctual satisfaction is the joy in amorality, under the license of external authorities. Perpetrators feel guiltless, not morally justified, in “dark fun”; moral justification is but a plea in the court after the deed. Therefore, the superego’s permission to the ego’s instinctual satisfaction is not a loud approval, but a tacit connivance.

5. Conclusion

Beyond the dichotomy of biological determinism and social constructivism, the phenomena of collective violence can be explained as the satisfaction of the ego’s aggressive instinct, which must be renounced in the advancement of civilization. The by-product hypothesis, in denying aggressivity of humans, falls prey to moralistic fallacy: less of an illogical leap in inference than a surrender of scholarly interpretations to ideological principles. One cannot blind oneself to the dark side of human nature. The initial reaction of battalion members in the RPB 101 evidence is supplied by the civilizing process: the disgust reaction to hedonic cruelty is an acquired taste. Guilt, a sign and

symptom of civilization, makes ego-consciousness refuse outward manifestation of its aggressive instinct. The hypothesis itself is a product of the ego's resistance to the instinct in civilization's later stage. The similar attempts at grounding collective violence on cognitive processing merely touch upon its rationalized manifestations after the civilizing process, but neglect to investigate its genesis, its *causa fiendi*. Collective violence—neither a means, nor an end, but a primordial epiphany—is now manifested in the form of moral rationalization, the superego's permission.

The aggressive instinct, despite the resistance of ego-consciousness, does not cease to exist: it is still there, as the repressed instinct, in the unconscious in need of satisfaction. Rather than instinctual repression, which would incur instinctual explosion followed by serious cultural traumas like those in the twentieth century, civilization needs sublimation of the aggressive instinct, the substitution of its aim and the displacement of the conditions for its satisfaction. Thus, the ego's aggressive energy can be directed to socially acceptable activities contributive to cultural achievements, being transformed from that which is life-destroying, other-debasing, and future-annihilating, into that which is life-preserving, self-transcending, and value-creating.

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