

HUMAN NATURE AND INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Thoughts on the Lower Instincts and the Higher Capacities

Seth Tillman

Man, it has been said, appears to be the missing link between anthropoid apes and human beings. The import of this not entirely facetious remark, attributed to the ethologist Konrad Lorenz, is that the human animal, like it or not, is animal as well as human, instinctive as well as rational. Man's nature, according to psychological and anthropological authorities, is an incongruous synthesis of intelligence and instinct, of humane empathy and animal egoism. His intelligence gives him the means to control his animal instincts but is more often used to rationalize them, enabling him to pretend that they do not exist, or to disguise them behind false and ennobling names. Thus, for example, envy may be called disdain and selfishness self-respect, pigheadedness may be called pride and arrogance responsibility. Ingenious nomenclature of this kind is particularly prevalent in the field of politics.

Man, though an animal, is clearly an unusual one. What makes him unusual, however, is not the possession of a nature which is different from that of other animals but the possession of certain capacities which other animals do not possess, such as reason and self-awareness, in addition to those basic instincts, such as hunger, sex and aggression, which they do possess. Man is therefore a kind of animal and a half, a mongrel of about two parts animal to one part angel.

Comparing our behavior with that of our benighted fellow-creatures here on earth, we come off no better than fairly well: it is true that we are better organized, more industrious and infinitely more creative; but it is also true that we alone are capable of cold-blooded killing — killing, that is, for reasons other than hunger, sex rivalry and the defense of territory. No other animal in all of evolution has ever become a danger to the survival of its own species; when species have perished, they have perished because they could not compete with some other species or could not adapt to their natural environment. Man, on the other hand, whose intelligence all too often

seems to be applied with greatest effect to the invention of weapons, has at last, within the present generation, perfected the instruments for his own destruction and for the destruction as well of most of the other living creatures upon the earth. Weighing man's achievements in art and letters, in social order and social ethics, against his extraordinary gift for the science of mass murder, one is forced toward the conclusion that, in moral terms, man's oversize brain has been a net detriment to life on the earth.

And yet man thinks in moral terms. Alone of God's creatures, he conceives of God, or of ethical restraint and moral purpose, of human rights and human duties, of compassion, generosity and the sanctity of life. How much better it might be, one is tempted to think, if, lacking a talent for these things, man also lacked the knowledge of and desire for them. But one does not really think so: we want purpose and morality and compassion in our lives and, as often as we fail to achieve them, we try again. And so we must, not because the prospects are favorable, but because any chance is better than no chance and because some things, even in the absence of evidence of their attainability, are worth an act of faith.

One wonders indeed whether man has any choice but to try to realize the ideals of which he conceives, whether there is not some ingrained and uniquely human characteristic that causes him — perhaps compels him — to strive to become what he is theoretically capable of becoming. Religion, philosophy and aesthetics are as much a part of our nature, though much less compelling, as aggression, hunger and sex. Both sets of drives, the higher and uniquely human ones and the lower animal ones, are products of the same brain: the one, say the neurophysiologists, of the cerebral cortex which is a late product of evolution, the other of the more ancient, lower centers of the brain. They are in constant interaction and it is as natural for the higher instincts to exert themselves as it is for the lower ones, the pity being the comparative feebleness of the former.

Possibly the single most important cause of the trouble the human race has gotten itself into is not

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the existence of our animal instincts, nor even the failure of reason and ethics to control them, but the complete omelet we have made by mixing the two together. We can hardly hope to control aggressive instincts and other subconscious drives when we cannot even bring ourselves to acknowledge their existence, when we disguise them with false names misappropriated from the vocabulary of reason and ideals.

This process of disguise and self-deception is endemic to international politics as it is normally practiced and it is by no means unknown in domestic politics. One might even define international relations as the process by which nations, in their dealings with each other, act upon primitive instincts in the name of elevated motives and noble sentiments.

There is no field of human activity in which the contrast between vocabulary and action is more striking than international relations. Statesmen say — and for the most part, I have no doubt, believe — that their foreign policies have such unimpugnable objectives as “freedom,” “peace,” and “human dignity.” The vocabulary is as common to Russians as it is to Americans, as common to Arabs as it is to Israelis. Why then is it, in the face of this universal devotion to freedom and peace, that the world is such a squalid mess, that freedom is rare and peace is so tenuous that any small war could explode into a global inferno? Why is it, in the face of everyone’s commitment to human dignity, that hundreds of billions of dollars are spent on armaments while most of the human race live in such profound physical and spiritual degradation as to mock the very concept of human dignity?

Why this incredible contrast between words and the reality of things? Is it because a harsh nature has defeated our best efforts? Is it, as we tell ourselves, because *we* mean what we say while other nations are led by liars and demagogues? Or, as I strongly suspect, is it because none of us fully understands his own behavior, because all of us are acting on unacknowledged instincts with false names, instincts rooted in an animal nature whose existence we deny? If so, then the really destructive deceptions of international relations are the self-deceptions, the fact that the Russians really believe their own propaganda and we believe ours.

Lying, albeit of a carefully prescribed kind, is one of the virtues of classical diplomacy. So refined and stylized is it that the very word “lying” is alien to the professional diplomat’s vocabulary. He speaks of a “lack of candor,” of “omission” and “indirection,” and he practices these with diligence. But the name of the lie is excluded and, with it, the knowledge of the lie, so that, in a subtle but effective way, the

perpetrator of the deception becomes the deceived.

There are, to be sure, virtues in understatement. Words create as well as express feelings, and it is well, when possible, to avoid the aggravation of hard feelings with hard words. But there is a danger here, the danger of disguising — not eliminating but simply disguising — hard feelings behind soft words. That is why, even in the sophisticated exchanges of diplomacy, it is sometimes well to call things by their proper names, to express honest anger in honest words, to say plainly what one thinks.

To say what one thinks, one must know what one thinks, and this brings me to a central point, the importance of acknowledging and becoming familiar with our primitive animal instincts. Then, and only then, can we hope to bring them under the control of the higher, distinctly human capacities — of intelligence, reason and compassion. It is simply a fact, a regrettable fact, but no less a fact for all our efforts to conceal it, that man is an aggressive animal with a highly developed instinct to fight for power, status and territory. Only when this instinct is clearly understood can we hope to understand our own motives, distinguishing between the drive to power and abstract principle, between ambition and ideology. Our principles are as real as our appetites, but we will never identify our valid ideals until we become familiar with the powerful motives within us which we mislabel ideals. Far from denigrating man’s moral and religious nature, an awareness of our irrational instincts must inspire us with a new respect for the power of reason and moral responsibility, which came into the world with man and which give him the power to civilize his animal inheritance and to become what he so deeply longs to be and falsely believes himself to be: a rational and compassionate human being.

Studies of animal societies reveal certain common characteristics — characteristics which are obscured in human societies by attaching false names to them. Most animal societies, for instance, have a “pecking order,” by which is meant a hierarchical order of social dominance in which every member knows his place in relation to every other. Because the pecking order in human societies is in varying degrees influenced by talent and merit as well as by brute force, it is commonly supposed by those at the top of the hierarchy that talent and merit were the sole determinants of their fortunate position. This assumption is quite erroneous, especially in international “society,” in which the pecking order has no more than a chance relationship to talent and merit.

Another common feature of animal societies, according to the neurophysiologist Hudson Hoagland, is the assumption that the group into which one was accidentally born is superior to other groups. Wolves, lions, elephants, baboons, yaks, Siamese fighting fish, ants, rats and human beings all are prepared to fight and die for their group or territory. In human societies this combative instinct, the product of millions of years of biological evolution, is called "patriotism."

The source of the confusion is the enlarged brain of man, itself the product of accidental (or perhaps divinely inspired) mutations in the course of evolution. The oversized brain of man gave him the ability to invent tools, to manipulate his environment, and to think conceptually. Since these skills did not displace but were superimposed upon pre-existing instincts, man has emerged as a most incongruous creature in two particular respects. First, his ability to conceptualize has, among other things, enabled him to think up the false names which he has attached to his animal instincts, causing the confusion of which we have spoken. Second, man's manipulative skill has made possible the invention of weapons which have made him dominant upon the earth but which now have overturned the natural balance by which every species tries to assure its own survival. The latter point warrants our further consideration; it goes to the heart of what I shall propose in the area of international organization.

In his recent book *On Aggression*, Konrad Lorenz makes the point that evolution has bred the strongest inhibitions on killing their own species into exactly those animals, such as lions, wolves and ravens, whose teeth or claws or beaks are so deadly that, if used without restraint against their own species, they would soon wipe it out. Instead of fighting to the death, these animals engage in a kind of ceremonial combat, fighting only to the point at which the dominance of one combatant becomes clear, whereupon the other shows some signal of surrender, such as the proffering of his neck by an outmatched wolf to the fangs of his rival, who then does not bite but accepts the surrender without further combat. The animals, on the other hand, with the least inhibitions on trying to kill their own kind are the ones which, being least likely to succeed, are therefore least threatening to their species survival; the slow and clumsy ones that are easily escaped from; and the ones with blunt teeth, short claws and small beaks which are easily resisted. Rabbits, for example, sometimes fight to the death, and Lorenz describes ferocious contests between caged doves, which neither make nor recognize any signal of surrender but continue the fight until one is pecked to death.

Man, with his small teeth, small claws, and minuscule inhibitions, is in the second category. In his natural state he is not particularly menacing to his fellow man, but technology has equipped man with artificial teeth and claws which have become ever more deadly with the advance of civilization. It has not, however, equipped man with inhibitions to counterbalance his artificially acquired capacity for killing; he has become, as it were, a dove with the beak of a raven. This is not to say that evolution will not catch up — Konrad Lorenz thinks it probably will, unless we blow ourselves up in the meantime — but until and unless it does breed inhibitions to match his power into the human animal, there will remain a gap, a terrifying gap indeed, between the capacity for killing conferred upon us by our technology and the meager inhibitions bred into us by nature.

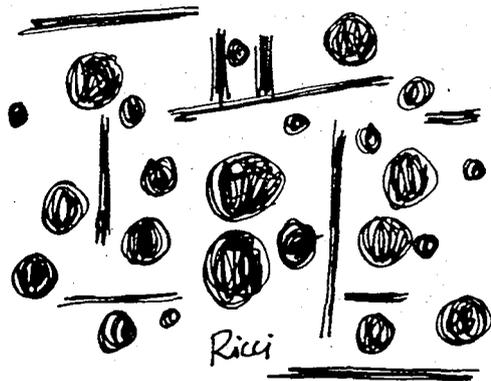
The one hope for bridging the fateful gap is in our fragile capacity to think intelligently — to foresee the consequences of our acts and to subject them to ethical restraints. History provides little basis for confidence that reason will prevail, but, with life itself at stake, one must deal with possibilities without asking what the probabilities are. And it is surely possible — if only barely possible — that man's lower instincts can be brought under the control of his higher capacities before a catastrophe occurs. As Albert Einstein said after Hiroshima: "... we cannot and should not slacken in our efforts to make the nations of the world, and especially their governments, aware of the unspeakable disaster they are certain to provoke unless they change their attitude toward each other and toward the task of shaping the future."

The task is the creation of restraints — ethical, legal and institutional — to compensate for the human deficiency in those instinctive restraints which prevent wolves and ravens from destroying one another. We must do for ourselves what nature has done for our benighted fellow creatures and the key to success is in our attitudes — in our limited ability to alter old attitudes and create new ones. The attitude above all others that needs to be altered is the tribal attitude of uncritical nationalism, and the attitude above all others that needs to be created is one of loyalty and some degree of responsibility to mankind as a whole.

Attitudes, unfortunately, are not learned like arithmetic tables and vocabulary lists. The urgency of the need notwithstanding, man is an excruciatingly slow learner in matters of morals. If we ever do succeed in shaping attitudes of loyalty to the whole human race, it will come about as the result of a tortuous process of accumulated experience and piece-

meal insights. To argue that there is no time for so extended an habituation, that we need a full-fledged world community *now*, may be correct but hardly useful. There is a gap between capacity and need, and one does not create the one by invoking the other. For myself, I have no doubt of the need for a world community and no confidence in man's ability to create it here and now. If only the impossible will save mankind, then mankind will not be saved.

I emphasize this point in prologue to the argument I shall make for a functional, gradual and largely non-political approach to the building of an international community. I advocate gradualism on grounds not of adequacy but of feasibility, aware that time is short and in deep apprehension that the furies unleashed over Hiroshima will consume us before our efforts to restrain them are rewarded. We can only do what we are able to do and, beyond that, it is for each of us, according to his lights, to trust in luck, to think of other things, or to pray to God.



Before elaborating what we are able to do toward building an international community a further word is called for on what we are not able to do and why. We are not able, as the Middle Eastern crisis of 1967 abundantly demonstrated, to use the United Nations as a reliable peace-keeping or peace-making institution. We are not able to do so because the normative precondition of a global system of collective security simply does not exist. That precondition, as Inis Claude has well pointed out, is the existence of a community, defined as a state of mind in which the good of the whole is felt to have precedence over the advantage of the parts, in which, for purposes at least of war and peace, a higher loyalty is felt toward mankind as a whole than toward any particular nation or ethnic group.

The inability of the United Nations to deal effectively with the Arab-Israeli conflict illustrates that which hardly requires illustration, the absence of that state of mind which we call community, without which there can be no collective security. There was a quality of unreality about the proceedings in both the

Security Council and the General Assembly during the Middle Eastern crisis of June 1967: facts and arguments were marshaled not with a view to drawing inferences from evidence but with a view to putting the best possible face on conclusions that had been reached before the proceedings began. Before the trial, so to speak, even began, the "judges" had divided into two camps and reached conflicting verdicts, whereupon they were prepared to hear the evidence which, whatever it was, would only confirm them in judgments already made. Everyone concerned was guided by prior commitments to friends or clients; no one was primarily interested in the law and equities of the case, still less in the broader requirements of world peace. No one in short was guided by a sense of international community and, because no one was, the United Nations, lacking that indispensable precondition, could not function as the world's principal institution for collective security.

It seems clear, from the experience of Korea, Vietnam and the Middle East, the major areas of military conflict since World War II, that, in matters of war and peace involving the great powers, the United Nations can do no more than provide a forum of conciliation, a forum that the great powers and those protected by the great powers will use or ignore at their convenience. It seems clear further that, for the foreseeable future, the most promising opportunities for developing a world community, always remembering that a community in its essence is a state of mind, lie in the area of social, economic and cultural activities.

My assumption is that, despite the disabilities of international organization in the political field, the international system as we know it is not immutable, that it can be modified by the application of human reason. The assumption is rooted in the premise that human nature is not immutable, that man, though constrained by his animal instincts, is not enslaved by them, that he has the capacity to change both himself and his world. That, indeed, is the premise of the United Nations Charter, that it is possible not just to play the traditional game of power politics, but, by practical and continuing effort, to change its nature, to civilize and humanize it.

Freedom of choice is the first premise of the functional approach to international organization; the second is the limited extent of that freedom of choice, imposed by the irrational elements of human nature which makes such excruciatingly slow learners in matters of ethics and attitudes. Science, languages and mathematics are learned with comparative ease by the purely intellectual processes of reading and listening; but cooperation and compassion have to be felt and,

their benefits experienced before they can be believed in. The point may be less obvious than it seems; so easily do we confuse words with the things to which they refer when those things are abstractions that, proceeding too hastily, we may suppose we have learned an idea or an attitude when all we have learned is its name. We may suppose that we are willing to cooperate when we are only willing to *say* that we are willing to cooperate, or that we feel compassion when we only wish to be thought compassionate. It is best then that we proceed with deliberation, alert to the dangers of a world in anarchy but alert as well to the dangers of self-deception when we strain our fragile moral capacity.

Functionalism is the experience of common and mutually rewarding effort; its purpose is not only social and economic progress but the shaping of attitudes which will make for an international community, attitudes which in turn will make it possible for the United Nations to become what its framers intended it to be, an institution for the prevention of war. In the view of David Mitrany, a leading advocate of the functional approach, a peaceful world society is "more likely to grow through doing things together in workshop and market place rather than by signing pacts in chancelleries." Or as Salvador de Madariaga has written, "Peace is no policy. . . . The only way to secure peace is to stop bothering about it and begin to work together to carry out together the business of the world." The long-term objective remains the same as that of the world federalists, but the approach is different and the time span is attenuated, based on the functionalist's more modest estimate of the limits of human capacity.

The functional approach purports to diminish by attrition and indirection the world's two great, overlapping political struggles — the cold war between Communist countries and the West and the antagonism between newly independent poor countries and formerly imperial rich countries. These conflicts have prevented the United Nations from becoming an effective peace-keeping institution by instilling in its members, according to their stake in the two struggles, radically different conceptions of the purposes meant to be advanced by the world organization. To the United States and the Soviet Union the United Nations has served largely as an arena for cold war propaganda and for competing efforts to charm the uncommitted, with each tending to emphasize or ignore the world organization according to where it saw tactical advantage. To Asian and African countries the United Nations has been a place where numbers con-

fer at least the appearance of power and, with occasional disregard of the legalities of the Charter, they have brought their numbers to bear in a long series of statements and resolutions against colonialism. Functionalism purports to circumvent these lingering antagonisms by drawing together the diverse parties — Communist and non-Communist, rich and poor — in modest common activities outside of current political controversies, activities which, though nonpolitical in content, can have profound political consequences.

The initial problem of functionalism is the intrusion of politics upon it. The Russians, for example, seeing no political advantage, have been grudging and stingy in their contributions to the specialized and affiliated agencies of the United Nations. With the exception of Yugoslavia, the Communist countries have refused to participate in the World Bank, regarding it as an instrument of the capitalist countries and, by their abstention, making it substantially that. The United States has been unreceptive to suggestions that it channel the major part of its development lending through international agencies, fearing the loss of what is believed to be valuable political leverage. Limited though its efforts have been, however, the United States has been the principal supporter of international social and economic activities and, at the same time that efforts are made to encourage greater participation in international agencies by the United States, it is even more important that other countries, particularly Communist and less developed countries, be encouraged to support international social and economic activities lest they lose their international character and become little more than instruments of American foreign policy.

It seems clear that, while social and economic cooperation is the best available method of eroding political animosities, some degree of political accommodation is necessary to induce the rivals to cooperate in nonpolitical fields. The two are interdependent, capable of stunting each other, but capable as well, if only antagonists can be induced to take a chance on trusting each other, of initiating a healthy and accelerating progress toward peace.

Where do the opportunities for progress lie? I suggest, by way of example, the creation of an international volunteer service modeled on the American Peace Corps, in which it seems possible, in the foreseeable future, for Communists and non-Communists, rich countries and poor countries, to cooperate in social, economic and cultural activities more or less free of disruptive intrusion by national and ideological animosities.

(to be concluded)