Peace in the Mind: Science and the Creation of a Peaceful Society

Benjamin B. Olshin, Ph.D.
Director, School of Design
Professor of Philosophy | History and Philosophy of Science and Technology | Design
The University of the Arts
320 South Broad Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19102 U.S.A.
e-mail: bolshin.uarts.edu

Introduction

This essay was written to serve as the foundation for a discussion at the Sixth Advanced International Colloquium on Building the Scientific Mind (BtSM2015), which took place from the 17th to the 21st of August 2015 in São Raimundo Nonato and Serra da Capivara, Piauí, Brazil. The colloquium was organized by the Learning Development Institute, in collaboration with FUMDHAM (Fundação Museu do Homem Americano), and in association with the Fundación Cultura de Paz, Universe Awareness (UNAWE), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

The main theme of the conference — *building peace in the minds of women and men* — is examined here in terms of *origins*. The primary question, then, is why peace does not seem to be the default setting (*a configuração padrão*) in the minds of human beings.

At the end of this essay, I briefly comment on what science — particularly in its original form of *scientia*, that is, knowledge — might tell us in terms of answering this question. Why is it that even as human beings desire a peaceful life, societies continue to engage in activities that are antithetical to peace and a harmonious existence?

This paper does not pretend to offer an academic resolution or even a strictly academic approach to these questions. It does not pretend to be a full-bore piece of anthropology or sociology. It offers the reader, perhaps, a new way of looking at this difficult problem, and a better articulation of the fundamental questions surrounding the creation of a peaceful society.

A Search for Origins

There have been a number of conjectures as to why human beings never seem to achieve lasting peace, but most of those conjectures work at a "meta" level, looking at failures in politics, diplomacy, and so on. Other conjectures blame — in a rather unscientific way — human evolution as the "cause" of our warlike nature, or provide specious biological explanations.[1]

Here, I introduce the lesser-known but what I believe is the much more fruitful idea that our inability to achieve peace is the result of a *pathology*. A pathology implies an illness, and the argument is that just as individuals might suffer a pathology and be ill, so, too, can a society suffer from this abnormality. Moreover, just as an individual's

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[1] For a good, non-academic summary (but citing academic sources) of this debate, see BBC - Earth, "Do Chimpanzee Wars Prove that Violence is Innate?", <http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20150811-do-animals-fight-wars>**.**

pathology will have an etiology, so, too, will a society's pathology have a definable origin.

But in addition to this critique, this paper also looks at how philosophy, as well as science — particularly science, again, as knowledge and as a form of reasoned, reflective thought — provide possible tools for creating lasting peace in the minds of human beings, and thus building a peaceful society. In a sense, I argue that peace is right there in front of us, if we care to choose it.

Some Fundamental Questions

A great deal has been written on the idea of peace, and the field of "peace studies" is an extensive one. However, for the purposes of this essay, and to address the theme of the conference — *building peace in the minds of women and men* — I have chosen to focus on the following questions:

1. Why is peace something that has to be "built"? That is, why is peace not the default condition of human beings?

2. Is there any historical proof that human beings at some point in their development lived without conflict?

3. What is the relationship between the conflict between human beings, and our conflict with (or abuse of) the natural environment around us?

4. What is the legitimacy — ethically, socially, and psychologically — in society's differentiation between criminal violence, which is seen as aberrant, and war, which is a form of condoned violence?

5. Is our current condition of perpetual conflict the result of a "universal pathology" among human beings? How might this be diagnosed and "treated"?

6. What is the potential role of *scientia* — that is, knowledge — as part of the process of building peace? That is, if the unifying quest among human beings were to become a quest for knowledge ,rather than social control and control of resources, might this lead to peace?

What the Past Tells Us

In some sense, the first two questions are the most difficult to answer, if they are answerable at all. Why is peace not the default condition of human beings? In terms of evolutionary theory, and comparisons with primates, it is often said that humans "by their nature" are violent. Conflict and the potential for violent action are seen as extensions — perhaps too often unfortunately hyperbolized extensions — of a natural and necessary tendency to protect ourselves, gain necessary resources, and so on. This is the basic argument that uses biological observations to build a social Darwinist model. The most general problem with this argument is that while humans certainly are primates, and share behaviors with other primates (not to mention other members of animal kingdom

overall), we are also *not* like other primates. It may sound simplistic, but it is important to say that while human beings have the capacity for violence, and perhaps even an instinct to engage in violence, we obviously also clearly have a highly-developed intellectual capacity to critique and even reject that violence. While one may complain about high crime rates in big cities, what is actually remarkable is that human beings are capable in living in such high-density environments while for the most part carrying on their business peacefully. One could almost argue that we have just as much an instinct for peaceful co-existence as we do for violent conflict.

The second question asks if there is any historical proof that human beings at some point in their development lived without conflict. This has plagued thinkers for thousands of years, with everyone from Plato to Laozi to modern anthropologists weighing in. In one sense, the question is important, but in another it is not: if the answer is yes, then one could argue that we can somehow "return" to that state of peaceful co-existence.

But our chances of find such a concrete answer to such a question is virtually zero. Nor is the question that important, in the sense that even if all human societies so far have suffered from conflict, that does not mean that future societies must also do so. The kind of "fatalist" thinking that just because up to now, we have had "situation *A*", we therefore must continue to have "situation *A*" is a very infantile kind of thinking. Indeed, human development both on a personal and societal development argues against this: human societies *have* shown themselves capable of change, even as individuals also are capable of change. Is such change easy? Of course not — indeed, this essay concerns what is perhaps the most fundamental change that human beings might ever go through. But the past does not spell the future — and it is less about some kind of blind optimism than an understanding that human intellect can be put to good use.

A Separate Peace

While the human intellect likely will be the engine that drives human society to a peaceful future, it is also the entity that often obstructs us. An example of this is in the meaningless separation and categorization of our interactions, in an attempt to rationalize what is actually irrational behavior. This is one of the implications of the fourth and fifth questions above: "What is the relationship between the conflict between human beings, and our conflict with (or abuse of) the natural environment around us?" and "What is the legitimacy — ethically, socially, and psychologically — in society's differentiation between criminal violence, which is seen as aberrant, and war, which is a form of condoned violence?"

In terms of violence, human societies often see no connection between our approach to the environment and our approach to each other. While a number of distinguished environmentalists, naturalists, and other thinkers have argued against the practice, human beings most often continue to view the natural environment as a resource to be exploited. This is an act of violence at the most fundamental level: the exhaustion of something finite — that is, killing it.[2]

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[2] For a good discussion of violence against nature, see Judith Shapiro, *Mao's War against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). A description of the book states: "Maoist China provides an

Again, historically, even early societies were capable of exhausting their environment, with Easter Island perhaps being the most famous example. But we cannot say now, in 2015, that we are ignorant of the dangers inherent in such actions against the environments. The *intellectual* knowledge of such facts must become part of our *natural* behavior, so that viewing the Earth and the environment as partners — or indeed one and the same with human beings — becomes the default state of existence.

As with the environment, our human intellect has allowed us to create a false differentiation between two types of action that are essentially the same: criminal violence and war. Again, this is an issue that has been examined at length but without resolution, in the sense that societies still treat these as separate entities, but for the peculiar notion of "war crimes". The most common ethical argument is that "just wars" use violence to remedy a social evil, with the most common example offered being the Allied war against the Nazis. However, there is a clear problem with this supposition. First of all, the evil here was itself a creation of an earlier war — the First World War. That earlier war without question "created" Hitler and provided a groundwork to his ideas. Moreover, while the defeat of the Nazis in the Second World War inevitably saved millions of lives, it, too, created the groundwork for subsequent conflicts — and this pattern will continue for millennia unless human beings start to build entirely new approaches. War *always* represents a failure in the resolution of conflict, and indeed often the conflict is one that need not have arisen in the first place.

The soldiers are not at fault here. Soldiers — particularly in the wars that we, as a society, feel proud of — engage in a noble act. We can say that this noble act is the soldiers' effort to defeat something evil. But a soldier will also be the first to tell a civilian that it is a regrettable and unfortunate way of doing this. We have all seen images of soldiers put to work rescuing earthquake or flood victims, and it is clear that military organization and the desire to "win" have a place in society — but scenario of rescue and recovery is the place for a miltary, where we are fighting a "battle" where it is not necessary to murder people who happen to be on the wrong "side".

A common argument against pacifism is that it allows evil to rise and go unchecked. That may be true in the "immediate present" of a given situation — no one in retrospect would say that Neville Chamberlain did the right thing in appeasing Nazi Germany. Hitler should have been stopped sooner. The problem is that once this argument is given, the conversation ends, whereas in fact it has missed a key point: why is there this *constant* "arising" of such evils? Certainly the Buddhists would have something to say about that, but even leaving philosophy and religion aside, the question of origins must be addressed. No sensible human being treats a medical condition simply by suppressing the symptoms again and again.

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example of extreme human interference in the natural world in an era in which human relationships were also unusually distorted"; note the connection between violence in the human society and the accompanying human violence against nature. Also see Tom Wessels, *The Myth of Progress: Toward a Sustainable Future* (Burlington, VT: University of Vermont Press, 2006), where he argues that our practice of continued economic expansion is completely irrational, and violates the laws that actually govern natural systems.

Structural and Historical Origins

Among the final questions here, then, are the following: Is our current condition of perpetual conflict the result of a "universal pathology" among human beings? How might this be diagnosed and "treated"? As noted earlier in this essay, conflict in terms of warfare, or even the current wave of "terrorism" (whatever that might mean exactly), is usually analyzed as the result of geopolitical or economic forces. This is because warfare and terrorism are seen as "mass" movements, carried out by organized military forces, or at least organized armed groups. Violence carried out by individuals is classified in a different way, and the motives for that violence similarly are treated as quite different. In short, individual violence is often seen as the result of *pathology*.

The word itself is revealing: "pathology" in its most general sense is a branch of medicine, i.e., the study of disease. However, when applied to the realm of mental issues, it specifically can mean a deviation from a norm, or the existence of an abnormal structure, pattern, or function in the mind. The Greek roots of the word are also interesting: ράθος ("disease") and λογία ("study of"). We can, in fact, take them slightly differently in this case: ράθος again as "disease", but λογία interpreted as closer to λογός — that is, "discourse" or "reason". In that way, one can read "pathology" as a kind of *abnormal discourse*, a reasoned argument that in fact is not reasonable or rational at all.

I would argue that human society currently is in a deeply pathological state, with warfare having been the default condition now for the entire lifetime of anyone at least fifty years of age.[3] There has not been, for example, a single year of my life when the U.S. was not engaged in a military action of some kind. Moreover, I would argue that in any healthy state of human existence, such a situation would have created alarm — however, it has been accepted as inevitable, or even as a norm. Again, in an individual, such a constant practice of violence would induce a call for treatment by a mental health professional, but when a society behaves this way, the behavior becomes normative.

But are both behaviors, i.e., societal and individual, caused by the same pathology? It seems clear that the answer is "yes". In both warfare and individual acts of violence, there is the pathological belief that such violence will "solve" a problem. In warfare, such a solution in fact may bring about a temporary solution — the First World War did indeed curb German aggression in Western Europe. But at the same time it created not only the rise of the National Socialist movement, but also the disaster of the newly created "nations" in the Middle East, such as Iraq. The pathology in this case, lies in the perverse belief that a war will somehow have delimited and clearly defined results. The pathology that warfare shares with individual violence also is more general: the (again, perverse) belief that violence is an actual means to resolve problems in the first place. The belief that (unnatural) death and destruction can somehow be formative is the very definition of abnormal mental behavior.

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[3] Two authors do indeed tackle this idea of warfare arising from pathological patterns of individual behavior "writ large". See the excellent discussions in a lecture entitled "The Great Ennui", in George Steiner's *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971); also see the chapter entitled "The Death Instinct: Why Men Fought" in Niall Ferguson's *The Pity of War: Explaining World War One* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

A more difficult, and perhaps unanswerable question here concerns historical origins. Have human beings always been this way? Was there a phase in the history of human societies where there was no violence? Or perhaps was there a phase in the history of human societies where there was occasional individual violence, but never a "mass pathology"? A hypothetical origin for human pathology is presented Robert Anton Wilson's entertaining play, "Wilhelm Reich in Hell":

> Many thousand years ago the first lunatic appeared. How or why he was produced I do not claim to know. People were natural and unarmored in those days: they still felt nature in themselves and around them. They had no concept of "mental illness"; they could not imagine it. When the first lunatic appeared, these simple, natural people could not understand that there was something wrong with him. They listened to his hallucinations and delusions and accepted these visions as reports from a higher world. There were fantasies of demons and flames such as schizophrenics still experience today. When such myths were believed, the delusions of the first lunatic were believed also. Many primary biological drives, such as humans have in common with all other animals, were called "Evil." In the attempt to repress these drives, muscular tensions and respiratory blocks developed; out of this armoring of the biological being, secondary drives of a perverted nature arose — sadism and masochism. Further armoring was then created to contain these destructive forces. The human race became completely unnatural, robotic, emotionally plagued. The process has continued and worsened over the centuries. There is no political solution to the problem; no matter who is in power, the armoring continues and sadism and masochism continue... We are mad, and we have the delusion that we are sane. We are robots, and have the delusion that we are free. We are obsessed, and have the delusion that we are scientific and rational.[4]

Wilson's point at the end is particularly relevant to our current situation — we cannot even see that we are behaving in a pathological manner because we believe that we have constructed a modern and rational society.

There have been philosophical speculations that peaceful periods existed before this apparent "lunacy". Certainly, earlier societies reflected back on a "golden age" when humans behaved in a very different way. We find this idea in Plato, and in a much more subtle form in the Daoist work known as the *Zhuangzi*:

> The understanding of the men of ancient times went a long way. How far did it go? To the point where some of them believed that things have never existed... Those at the next stage thought that things existed, but recognized no boundaries among them. Those at the next stage [after that] thought there were boundaries, but recognized no right and wrong. Because right and wrong [then] appeared, the Way was injured...[5]

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[4] Robert Anton Wilson, *Wilhelm Reich in Hell* (Phoenix, AZ: New Falcon, 1990), 157.
[5] Burton Watson, *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 36-37.

In this passage, we see the Daoist concept that the "fall" of mankind is a step-by-step process, wherein human beings move away from a holistic frame of mind and towards a practice of categorizing and classifying. Much of Daoist philosophy is a discussion of the artificial and destructive nature of such modes of categorical thinking. In short, Daoist philosophy articulates the idea that categories create conflict.

Whether such conjectures in ancient sources that human beings of the remote past were different comprised a fantasy or not, they are interesting ideas to consider, and perhaps point a way to the future — just because a peaceful and harmonious human society might not have existed in the past does not mean it can not exist in the future. Indeed, Daoist texts imply that such a harmonious form of human society is indeed achievable.

In terms of a hypothetical original "fall", there also have been more anthropological models put forward that speak to a kind of fundamental change that may have occurred in human brain structures millennia ago. This change, the models argue, set up a "schism" that led to our subsequent pathology of conflict and violence.[6]

Looking to the Future

The final question I wish to examine here is this: "What is the potential role of *scientia* — that is, knowledge — as part of the process of building peace?" In some sense, that question has been addressed in the discussion above. The first step is coming to understand that knowledge *itself* is not being pursued — we are living in a highly structured society that we mistakenly believe, as Wilson says, is "scientific and rational". But in fact, what human beings need, first of all, is *self*-knowledge. Again quoting Wilson:

> To state these facts bluntly is to insult the vanity of every man and women on the planet, and to be denounced as a fanatic, an extremist, an anarchist. But if we are to have any chance of survival at all, at least one person must speak out frankly and tell the truth about the horror of the situation. No matter how it offends religious dogmas about free will, scientific dogmas about our own rationality, or political dogmas that the problem exists only in some other country full of bad people. The problem exists in each and everyone of us. In your shallow breathing. In your tense muscles. In your anger at hearing the truth about yourselves.[7]

The reference to "shallow breathing" is an echo of Zen philosophy, which is all about harmony, and Zen, though Buddhist, is in turn very much the living practice of fundamental Daoist ideas. "Shallow breathing" comes, in this philosophy, from a lack of awareness of one's own body, one's own state of being.

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[6] See, for example, Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), and the more speculative (but quite interesting) discussion in Terence McKenna's *Food of the Gods: The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge* (New York: Bantam, 1992)

[7] Wilson, 157-158.

Even from a less philosophical or spiritual perspective, the concept of knowledge is key. First of all, as outlined earlier, one could argue that a unifying quest among human beings could be for knowledge rather than social control and control of resources. To make this change, in turn, would require a more subtle knowledge that the Earth is not a "resource", and that the very idea of "sustainable growth" is pathological. Similarly, education must shift its foundation to the *cultivation of natural curiousity* rather than the "colonization of the intellect".[8]

There are those who argue, as mentioned earlier, that our basic nature is violent, and so conflict among human beings is inevitable. However, it seems clear that we are not programmed like bees, birds, and so on, to simply adapt to our environment. Instead, we use discourse and other aspects of our intellect. For example, instead of instinctively building nests or hives, human beings talk and plan and build skyscrapers or huts or brick houses or whatever else we consciously design. The significance of this is that human beings can consciously *choose* things. At least as far as we know, our conscious realm is much wider than that of animals. This allows us, too, however, to lose our way — or indeed the holistic way of living or *Way* of the Daoists. But from a positive and formative perspective, this also means that as human beings we are lucky to be given a method of being *conscious* of being off or on the *Way*. Moreover, then, the "grand human adventure" is this: to have a chance to consciously choose the *Way*, to live in harmony. Human beings often mistake our own creations — e.g., good and evil — for the actual creations of the universe. This is the mistake of categories. Yet, we also can use our intellect to see beyond the categories and constructs that we have created. The bird flies on its way apparently without noticing — we *do* notice, by contrast, our walking as we engage in it.[9]

Why do we have an intellect? It is an adaptive mechanism, to help us survive in the environment — to figure out how to build shelter, make clothes, gather food, and so on. Our intellect exists for survival purposes, but we can use it, as well, to pursue knowledge, and to engage in more abstract and spiritual knowledge. That knowledge, in turn, has the capacity to move us towards the creation of a peaceful society.

Peace is not a political problem — it is a problem of knowledge.

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[8] I wish to thank the Alex Schein for articulating these concepts.
[9] These ideas are the result of a highly engaging dialogue with the documentarian and theologian Stephen Milton.