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The End of War

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A review of *The End of War* by John Horgan (San Francisco: McSweeney's Books, 2012)

John Horgan is a professor and Director of the Center for Science Writings at Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey. He states in his Introduction that he wrote this book . . . “to make the case that the end of war is possible, and even imminent.”¹ Granting that his is a minority view, the author begins with the premise that *war is a choice*.

The conventional wisdom is that while virtually everyone claims to be opposed to war, war continues. Yet it cannot be inevitable, for all events have causes. Therefore, if we could identify the causes of war and eliminate them, war could be eliminated. Horgan says that when he asks his students the causes of war, he typically gets the following: innate male aggression, ambition, greed, the desire for freedom, religion, ethnic differences, capitalism, patriotism, overpopulation, poverty, inequality, the military-industrial complex, the media, stupidity, and boredom.

The point of the exercise is to demonstrate that war has no single cause and no single solution. Some factors that trigger conflicts can also help suppress them; i.e., they are both causes and solutions. In 1986, David Adams, a psychologist at Wesleyan, and

¹ Introduction, p. 16.

nineteen other scientists launched a campaign to dispel the myth that war is inherent in our human nature. The scientists met in Seville, Spain, under the auspices of the United Nations, and drafted a statement that began with five propositions:² It is scientifically incorrect:

1. to say that we have inherited a tendency to make war from our animal ancestors.
2. to say that war or any other violent behavior genetically programmed into our human nature.
3. to say that in the course of human evolution there has been a selection for aggressive behavior more than for other forms of behavior.
4. to say that humans have “violent brain.”
5. to say that war is caused by “instinct” or any single motivation.

The author devotes the remainder of the book to an analysis of the reasons (and the reasons given) for going to war. The reader will find no easy answers here. Are there men who seem to take pleasure in war, including killing. Are they responsible for starting wars? Highly improbable, knowing what we do about men who actually fight in wars.

Do scarce resources make us fight? Sometimes, yes; sometimes, no; however, there are no data to indicate that resource scarcity in itself is either a necessary or sufficient reason for going to war, wartime propaganda to the contrary notwithstanding.

In his fourth chapter, on war as a cultural contagion, the author quotes Margaret Mead as asking: “If we know that it [war] is not inevitable, that it is due to historical accident that warfare is one of the ways in which we think of behaving, are we given any hope for that?”³

At the end of that chapter the author writes: “Modern societies resolve conflicts via a wide range of institutions, from local courts to town halls to senates to parliaments and all the way up to the World Court and the United Nations. . . . We have the ways to end wars. We need only the will. . . . some extremely belligerent societies have found the will, and there are even tantalizing signs that humanity as a whole may be choosing peace.

² Chap. 1, p.30

³ Chap. 4, pp.121-122.

I finished the book with a feeling of ambiguity. It is a good book, and well worth reading for the author's many insights into the phenomenon of war and as a serious attempt to analyze that institution. It goes without saying that the end of war does not imply the end of conflict, but what is needed is what William James referred to as "a moral equivalent of war."

I believe that Professor Horgan is correct when he states that we have the ways to end wars, "will," whatever that means, does not count for much until it is institutionalized into patterns of behavior that will promote human welfare while prohibiting or ameliorating the destruction of human life.

There is hope. In a recent article in the *New Yorker*, Adam Gopnik said that the number to remember is sixty million. "That is the approximate and probably understated) number of Europeans killed in the thirty years between 1914 and 1945, victims of wars of competing nationalisms on a tragically divided continent. The truth needs re-stating: social democracy in Europe, embodied by its union, has been one of the greatest successes in history.