

Why War? ^[1]

Courtenay Young

Abstract:

This essay is an attempt to answer a fundamental question about the aberrant human behaviour of war or warfare. There are very few examples of such behaviour in the animal kingdom, hence the word ‘aberrant’: the human animal is possibly the only animal on the planet (bar one) that conducts sustained aggression (warfare) against others of its own species. There are many examples of anger or rage, and even of other aberrant behaviours (like abuse) but sustained and directed rage against other groupings of the same species is incredibly rare, if not unique, among animal species. Why is this?

Key Words:

war, warfare, origins, palaeontology, neolithic

What is War?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “war” as:

1. A state of armed conflict between different countries or different groups within a country.
2. A state of competition or hostility between different people or groups.
3. A sustained campaign against an undesirable situation or activity.

In 1932, the League of Nations invited Albert Einstein to engage another prominent world figure of his choosing with the question, “Is

there any way of delivering mankind from the menace of war?” Sigmund Freud was chosen and responded to this question in ‘Why War?’ Freud presented a psychological look into aggression, violence, and war and introduced readers to concepts and theories that have shaped human understanding of their own actions, both peaceful and violent (Freud, 1933). Unfortunately, albeit 90 years later, despite the efforts of these two great intellects, we are still not much better off.

Conflicts of interest between man and man are resolved, in principle, by recourse to violence. It is the same in the animal kingdom, from which man cannot claim exclusion;

1. An earlier version of this article appeared in the International Body Psychotherapy Journal, Vol. 21, No. 2, Fall/Winter, 2002-23, 13-22: www.ibpj.org/issues/tocs/TOC%20IBPJ%20Vol%2021%20No2.pdf.

nevertheless, men are also prone to conflicts of opinion, touching, on occasion, the loftiest peaks of abstract thought, which seem to call for settlement by quite another method. This refinement is, however, a late development.

To start with, brute force was the factor which, in small communities, decided points of ownership and the question of which man's will was to prevail. Very soon physical force was implemented, then replaced, by the use of various adjuncts; he proved the victor whose weapon was the better or handled the more skilfully.

Wars have seemingly been a part of human history for thousands of years and have become increasingly destructive. The 'rule of law' (that Freud proposed as a remedy) does not work very well, despite the United Nations. As Ferrill (1985) reminds us, war is not a modern invention – even though modern warfare has become incredibly prevalent, especially in recent centuries – wars have been with us since (at least) the Stone Age. It seems that – at some point in the dawn of human pre-history – early human societies adapted techniques and weapons that were originally developed for hunting animals, towards fighting other people. But why?

There is, to our knowledge, at least one other animal species on this planet that regularly conducts a form of warfare: in fact, this is one of our nearest relatives, the chimpanzee, *Pan troglodytes*.^[2]

A recent (2023) 4-part Netflix series for TV, *Chimp Empire*, is about troops of chimpanzees in the Ngogo forest in Uganda's Kibale National Park (that contains the largest known group of chimpanzees in the world). This group has been studied for over 20 years.^[3] The film-

makers have spent years catching aspects of chimpanzee life that have never been seen on film before, which was the 2nd series made about the Ngogo chimpanzees, as there was an earlier (2017) film, *Rise of the Warrior Apes*, by the same filmmaker, James Reed.

Whilst instances of aggression between rival groups of chimpanzees were fairly well-known previously, what was exceptional – and what was clearly caught by these films – was that the original 'central' group had split into 2 or 3 other groups, occupying neighbouring territories.

Apparently, chimpanzees are very, very, very territorial and – purely because of this split – there arose a great rivalry between the larger central group and the smaller, but more closely bonded, western faction of these chimpanzee groups. Chimpanzees have an incredibly complex societal structure and can form very strong and sophisticated social politics and familial relationships: forming alliances, building trust, caring for one another, as well as often going head-to-head in a seemingly never-ending fight for dominance.

These films give completely new insights about the violence, brutal power struggles, rivalry, enmity, friendships, and diplomacy within these strictly hierarchical primate groups and also about the territorial rivalry between neighbouring groups. There exists not only severe aggression, on a regular basis, towards conspecifics (members of the same species) and furthermore a state of actual warfare exists between the neighbouring chimpanzee groups.

This is possibly because chimpanzees are very dependent on their food sources – mainly fruit trees – and the different types of fruit trees in

2. Chimpanzees share about 98.8% of their DNA with humans.

3. For more information about the Ngogo Chimpanzee Project, see: campuspress.yale.edu/ngogochimp/project/

this region come into season at different times, so there is a territorial imperative to be able to access these different trees whenever needed: therefore, competition is rife – and whilst there is a good tradition of sharing within any particular group, there is absolutely no sharing with others outside of the resident group.

The most important food source is the giant fig tree, *Ficus mucosa*, which does not fruit seasonally and yet which produces enormous fruit crops, some of which are available most of the time. The feeding territory of a particular group must therefore be quite flexible, which is not problematic – as long as there are no rival groups.

Furthermore, an additional factor is that the brutal group hunting of other monkey species is very common: monkeys (especially the red colobus monkey (*Piliocolobus*) that also eat this fruit) are regularly chased away, and are also frequently caught, killed and eaten by the chimpanzees.

An emergent property of between-group competition is evolutionary group dominance, which increases the size of their territory and reduces neighbour pressure in wild chimpanzees (Lemoine *et al.*, 2020; Amsler, 2009). Increases in the number of males in a group lead to territorial increases, as a result of the dominant role of males in territorial acquisition and protection. Males regularly go out in ‘patrol’ groups to maintain – and extend – the boundaries of their territory and, if they meet a chimpanzee from another group, they will almost inevitably chase and often kill it. Patrolling groups of chimpanzees cover long distances, and these patrols are likely to involve high levels of energetic costs for participants, as well as some considerable dangers.

Meeting up with a number of chimpanzees from another group **always** results in war-like behaviour (with aggressive behaviour and the use of weapons – stick and stones) and individuals will often be hurt and killed until the smaller group flees, which then results in a territorial extension for the larger group. However, what the filming shows, is that the cohesion within a particular group is also significant as a closely-knit group will work together much better than a group with inherent rivalries, even if that group is larger.

These sorts of anthropological observations have stimulated numerous comparisons between chimpanzee violence towards neighbouring chimpanzee groups and similarities with instances of human warfare. Male chimpanzees compete with males in other groups over territory, food and females and base their decisions to attack strangers on assessments of numerical strength and strive for dominance over neighbouring groups (Wilson & Wrangham, 2003). This is – in actuality – a form of warfare. Further exploration (Engelhaupt, 2016) gives:

Humans inherited a propensity for violence from our primate ancestors, a new study says, making it easy to think, “Ah, see – we really are just animals.” But that doesn’t give animals enough credit. The first humans were probably about as violent as could be expected based on their family tree, (researchers report, September 28 in the journal, Nature^[4]). The scientists pored through examples of lethal violence – not animals killing other species, such as predators and prey, but killings within a species, whether by cannibalism, infanticide, or aggression.

4. [nature.com/articles/doi:10.1038/nature19758](https://www.nature.com/articles/doi:10.1038/nature19758)

More often, though, people think animals are more violent than they really are, says animal behavior expert Marc Bekoff, an emeritus professor at the University of Colorado Boulder. "Violence might be deep in the human lineage, but I think people should be very cautious in saying that when humans are violent, they're behaving like non-human animals," Bekoff says.

Bekoff has long contended that non-humans are predominantly peaceful, and he points out that, just as some roots of violence can be found in our animal past, so can roots of altruism and cooperation. He cites the work of the late anthropologist Robert Sussman, who found that even primates, some of the most aggressive mammals, spend less than one percent of their day fighting or otherwise competing.

These differences among primates matter, says Richard Wrangham, a biological anthropologist at Harvard known for his study of the evolution of human warfare. In chimpanzees and other primates that kill each other, infanticide is the most common form of killing. But humans are different – they frequently kill each other as adults. "That 'adult-killing club' is very small," he says. "It includes a few social and territorial carnivores such as wolves, lions, and spotted hyenas." While humans may be expected to have some level of lethal violence based on their family tree, it would be wrong to conclude that there's nothing surprising about human violence, Wrangham says. "When it comes to murderous tendencies", he says, "humans really are exceptional."

Wrangham's book (1996) explores, in a meticulous manner, some of the controversial issues about human aggression, when examined anthropologically. It unfolds a compelling argument that the secrets of a peaceful soci-

ety may well be, first of all, a sharing of power between males and females, and secondly, a high level and variety of sexual activity (both homosexual and heterosexual). The authors:

... present evidence that most dominant human civilizations have always been likewise behaviorally patriarchal, and that male humans share male chimpanzees' innate propensity for dominance, gratuitous violence, war, rape, and murder. They [also] claim that the brain's prefrontal cortex is also a factor, as humans have been shown experimentally to make decisions based both on logic and prefrontal cortex-mediated emotion.

They also quote an example of primate behaviour in bonobos (*pan paniscus*: sometimes called 'pygmy' chimpanzees), who live in a predominantly (please note) matriarchal system and are unique for their female-biased dispersal relationships that encourage resolution and peace-making tactics among the group and discourage violence and war. Bonobo social structures reject aggression and focus on the power of cooperation, and this benefits the overall survival of the group.

It is perhaps interesting that Erich Fromm, in his 1973 book, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, states there are stable, life-affirming, unwarlike, often matriarchally-oriented social associations in which there was no need to hold down an alleged instinct to kill. (Fromm, 1973, pp. 158-172) As late as 1998, the ethnographic atlas listed 160 "purely matrilineal" – that is, considering only maternal descent – "indigenous peoples and ethnic groups". That was still about 13% of the 1267 ethnic groups recorded worldwide. Erich Fromm's book is (perhaps) "the most comprehensive compilation of arguments from psychoanalysis, (social) psychology, palaeontology, anthropology, archaeology, neuropsychology, animal psychology, and historical

science that speak for an innate human tendency to cooperation and peacefulness.”^[5] However, this is obviously not enough to overcome the latent aggressive instincts in humans that co-exists.

Since male violence is – by most counts – evolutionary undesirable (as well as being morally reprehensible) and – given modern weapons – the existence of the whole species is now potentially threatened. Whilst some figures that suggest that violence has been decreasing in some human societies, the case is also made that human males are genetically predisposed to violence, but that the human species also has the intellectual capacity to override this flaw ... but only if our human society generally recognises that it is in the interest of humanity’s survival to do so. There is no doubt that we come into the world with the potential for pro-social behaviour, for love, friendship, co-operation, and peacefulness. However, there is also a latent tendency for aggression, especially in males – as any mother of young boys knows. The result of these two opposing tendencies depends on how each is fostered in the child’s upbringing.

In a world like ours, which is characterized by authoritarian hierarchies, exploitation, oppression, family and state control, and environmental destruction, there is little room for the development of psychologically healthy children.

The resulting suffering and deprivation, their often inadequately satisfied needs, cause grief, pain, and anger – which, as a rule, may not be adequately expressed to their educators.

For this reason, these feelings get dammed up until they reach destructive proportions –

a condition later reinforced by humiliations at school, in training, and in the professional and working spheres. Since even such dammed-up feelings are usually not allowed to be acted out officially – unless, e.g., one becomes a soldier – they are hidden behind a façade of social conformity, politeness, and niceness. (Peglau)

Given all this as background and given the evolution of humans from a chimpanzee-like ancestor (5 million years ago), we can now possibly begin to look at human aggression in a different light.

The First Evidence of War

When modern humans (Cro-Magnon man) emerged somewhere between about 200,000 and 40,000–50,000 years ago, they were sufficiently adaptable to survive the last Ice Age that peaked about 18,000–20,000 years ago, before it gave way to the interglacial Holocene epoch about 11,500 years ago. During this Holocene period, modern humans were able to take advantage of the warmer weather to develop agricultural and domestication techniques. This interglacial period, which we are still in, affected northern latitudes much more than equatorial regions.

Unfortunately, those hotter, more equatorial regions have a much poorer archaeological record. Global sea levels have also risen since the peak of the Ice Age by as much as 400 feet. This sort of increase is responsible for hiding any evidence of any coastal developments and artefacts.^[6]

It must also be remembered that another proto-human species, the Neanderthals, had also lived in similar areas, especially throughout

5. Peglau, Andreas (2023). *Are we born warriors?* andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de/are-we-born-warriors/#_ftn6

6. In the last 100 years or so, 1901–2018, the globally average sea level rose by 15–25 cm (6–10 ins).

Europe. They had been existing there from about 400,000 years ago up to about 40,000 years ago (BCE).^[7]

Recent archaeological finds suggest that Neanderthal technology was quite sophisticated. It included the Mousterian^[8] 'flint' stone-tool industry, as well as the ability to create fire and build cave hearths, make adhesive birch bark tar, craft at least simple clothes (similar to wraps, blankets and ponchos), weave natural materials, make use of medicinal plants (as well as treat severe injuries), store food, and use various cooking techniques such as roasting, boiling, and smoking. Neanderthals also made use of a wide array of hunted food, mainly hoofed mammals, but also used other megafauna, plants, small mammals, birds, and aquatic and marine resources. Although they were probably apex predators, they still had to compete with cave bears, cave lions, cave hyaenas, and other large predators. They mainly lived in natural caves. However, the Neanderthals disappeared shortly after we (Cro-Magnon man) appeared about 40,000 years ago, despite having been around for several hundred thousand years.

So, the transition of the dominant human species from Neanderthal to Cro-Magnon is possibly very significant. The Neanderthal's slightly larger brain capacity, devoted more towards vision and physical control, did not seem to encourage 'higher order' thinking and so, they began to lose out when in competition with the newer, more modern, more adaptable Cro-Magnons (Pearce, Stringer & Dunbar, 2013). The Neanderthals never invented written language, agriculture, nor did they evolve

tools beyond the traditional flint Stone Age ones.

It is, perhaps, too easy to assume that there was not just competition for food, shelter and natural resources that existed between the two species, but there was possibly / probably also conflict. There has been no clear archaeological evidence found for such conflict, but this does not remove the possibility that early warfare – due to the pressure of competition for similar resources – started then, about 40,000 years ago.

It may also be possible that the implications of potential genocide by our Cro-Magnon ancestors are so unpalatable that such evidence can easily and conveniently be overlooked. However, there is also some DNA evidence of interbreeding, mostly confined to Europe and Asia, where Neanderthals lived (but much less so in Africa), though it is quite possible that such 'mixed' offspring were possibly less viable, or less socially acceptable, so that their lineage may have died out quite quickly.

Early Natural Aggression?

There is some evidence – that some of the earlier hominids (*H. Australopithecus* (3.5 – 3 mya), who lived fairly widespread throughout Eastern and Southern Africa – may have been quite aggressive. Some of the history of other hominid species that evolved in different branches, *H. Habilis* (2.3 – 1.6 mya), *H. Erectus* (1.8 – 0.3 mya), is very, very patchy. *H. habilis* probably used stone tools. It is also possible that these early species may have co-existed, but there is no absolute evidence that they evolved one after the other. Their differential

7. BCE: Before the Common Era.

8. 'Mousterian' refers to the period when there was an industry of stone tool making, associated primarily with the Neanderthals in Europe and the Levant and to the earliest anatomically modern humans in Europe, North Africa and West Asia. It started around the end of the Middle Palaeolithic era and represented quite a technological step forward, where stone tools are shaped into points, flakes, blades and cores.

evolution may have resulted from a beneficial climate change.

At some point in this early period, hominids like *H. Erectus* started to use fire. These hominids spread quite widely throughout Eurasia, with a continental range extending from the Iberian peninsula to as far east as Java. There is no proper evidence that they made any sophisticated tools or weapons (other than stone hand-tools), but they may well have used animal bones (or branches) as a club. *H. erectus* is postulated to have been the earliest human ancestor capable of using fire, hunting and gathering in co-ordinated groups, caring for injured or sick group members, and possibly simple seafaring, and even art. There is – as yet – no evidence of inter-species violence within this species. However, it is also quite likely that there was little pressure from competing or co-existing species, which might have engendered any inter-species aggression.

There were – and still are – a number of controversial theories about the nature of animal aggression in man, but a more recent consensus is that these earlier species were probably quite peaceful. There is however some evidence of aggression from skulls with holes in them, but this is not conclusive. It is possible to theorise that there might have some intra-species aggression, with some competition between small family groups, but given the widespread nature and the relatively small numbers, the concept of actual ‘war’ for these species is hardly tenable.

Given that later hominid species (*H. habilis*, *H. erectus*, *H. neanderthalensis*, etc.) were more adaptable, quite widely spread out, not so reliant on single food sources, and more able to travel widely, any form of competition for the basics (food, shelter, mates) was possibly quite small. Therefore, the war-like aggression (as seen in the films of the chimpanzees) may well have lain dormant until we (their survivors)

became more competitive and/or until social pressures became sufficiently strong to ‘trigger’ the *Homo* species’ war-like tendencies.

By the start of the last Ice Age (about 70,000 years ago), when Neanderthals were widespread, there is evidence that wooden spears were in common use, but no evidence that these were used against other people (i.e., skeletons with splintered ribcages). One Neanderthal skeleton has been found with a hole in the pelvic section that might have been made by a spear, but this could have been a hunting accident. Their main tool was probably the pebble chopper, or its later development into the stone (flint) hand axe, but this can hardly be considered as a weapon of war.

There is, however, some significant evidence coming from the late Palaeolithic Age (35,000 to 14,000 BCE), the age of Cro-Magnon cave paintings. In these paintings, spear points of stone and bone are commonly illustrated, and even quite a sophisticated spear-thrower, that extended a person’s forearm and gave the spear greater range, accuracy and penetrating power. However, the plethora of cave paintings reflect very little evidence of warfare.

*There are several thousand scenes of animals, and, on the whole, they are idyllically peaceful. Only, about 130 depictions altogether may be of men – the figures are too crudely drawn to permit certainty – and a few of the men ... seem to be dead or dying from wounds. Still, most of the 130 anthropomorphs are shown in peaceful scenes. (Ferrill, p. 17). Of all the Palaeolithic cave paintings, **only one** illustrates what may be arrows, but there are no depictions these are bows, and the ‘arrows’, if they are not male sex-symbols, as many believe, could just as easily represent spears or darts. (Ibid, p. 18)*

Given all that, in the beginnings of this interglacial period, at the end of the Palaeolithic, and during the Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age,

12,000–9,000 BCE), there begins to be appear some archaeological evidence of warfare. Up to this point, the only potential weapons available were Stone Age spears, daggers, and clubs – all used predominantly in hunting.

However, there were four other types of tools (weapons) developed in this period: the sling, the dagger (or short sword), the mace or club, and then later, the bow and arrow. Clearly, by Neolithic times (c. 6,000 BCE), the bow and arrow were used both in the hunt and there is also some significant evidence from this period that the bow and arrow was also used in warfare.

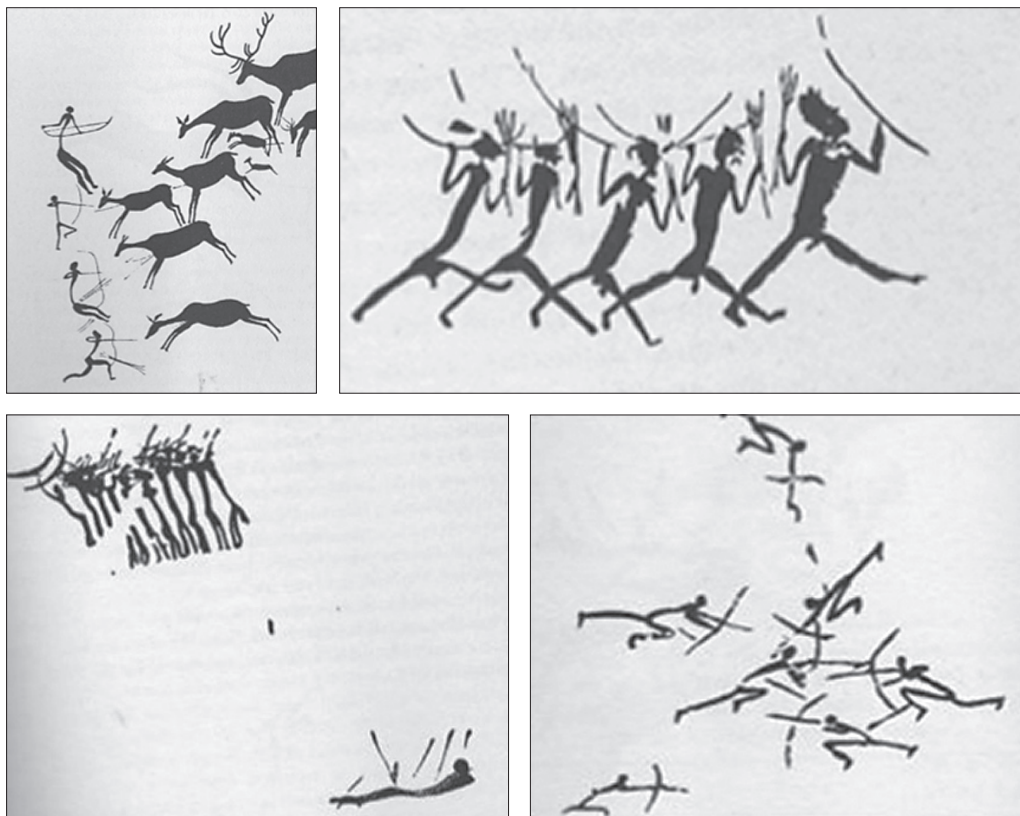
“Much more important for the history of warfare, there is evidence for the application of strategy and tactics by the beginning of Neolithic times, the use of organised troops according to plan. It is generally assumed, probably correctly, that strategy and tactics in human warfare emerged out of the complex hunting patterns of Palaeolithic man. There is considerable evidence that organized groups of men, almost certainly under the command of a leader, helped to stampeded large animals over cliffs or to draw them into bogs.” (Ibid, p. 20).

However, the availability of weapons does not produce war; there needs to be an underlying genetic tendency towards physical violence and aggression towards the “Other” – be it tribe, race, country, or nation. Chagnon (1968) – studying warfare between the Yanomamo villages in the Amazon – concludes that competition for food, water, territory or women creates the initial friction, but then minor bow-and-arrow confrontations ensure, escalating to a death, and then the other tribes enact their revenge, which results in warfare. Blood vengeance then ‘pays off’ in increased social status and reproductive success. This sort of anthropological pattern can be seen in several other societies, like the 19th century Cheyenne Indians.

Ember & Ember (1994), who analysed anthropological descriptions of 186 non-industrial societies, offered a tentative theory of war (at least in such ‘simple’ societies) in that the most war-like seem to express considerably more fear of food shortages, caused by expected but unpredictable natural disasters, such as drought, food or infestations. The fear of the ‘Others’ further fuels the tendency to ‘fight-or-flight’ and parents in war-prone societies may have encouraged toughness and aggression in boys, but this tendency is fuelled by war-like conditions, rather than causes it.

As time passed and human societies evolved in the Late Neolithic period (c. 7,000–5,000 BCE), there is distinct evidence of several matrilineal societies: the Neolithic settlements of the Fertile Crescent (such as Çayönü, Çatalhöyük, Hacilar Höyük, Nevali Cori, Jerico, etc.), the earliest settlements in Mesopotamia, the early Indus culture, the Neolithic Vinča culture, the Bandkeramik culture, several of the megalithic cultures, and the Minoan culture on Crete. However, there is no clear correlation between these Neolithic matriarchal societies and societies that show any signs of violence, war, and social differences, which suggests they may have been less war-like.

It seems that human-on-human warfare might have become fairly well-established by the later Neolithic (10,000 – 3,000 BCE), with the advent of fixed human settlements and the beginnings of agriculture, particularly with the development of bows and arrows. This contradicts somewhat the theory that early humans might have developed (or extended) warfare by exterminating the Neanderthals some several thousand years earlier, but then – if war is a result of increased tension between neighbouring communities – there may have been an extended period of reduced tension, caused by (say) an external factor like better climatic conditions.



Neolithic Cave Paintings from the Spanish Levant. Showing hunters with bows and arrows: 1) organized in a deer hunt; 2) in a column of (mostly) men, with a designated leader (with headdress); 3) in a file, possibly executing another person with arrows; and 4) with 4 warriors attacking 3 others, flanking them on two sides. (Source: Ferrill, pp. 20-22)

There are some Neolithic paintings from the Spanish Levant in which: (a) warriors attack a herd of deer; (b) marching warriors in a column are carrying bows and arrows and have a leader, differentiated by a headdress; (c) another painting shows a possible 'execution' with archers organized into a firing line, presumably firing on command at a separated body with arrows in it; and (d) a fourth Neolithic paint-

ing shows four warriors attacking three others, flanking them on both sides, though it is possible that this was a spontaneous attack, rather than a planned strategy (i.e. a war).

There is further definitive archaeological evidence of a prehistoric massacre in northern Sudan, with skeletons dating back about 13,000-14,000 years ago.^[9] There is also, apparently, evidence of another warlike situ-

9. The earliest site of a war is at Jebel Sahaba, with the conflict apparently between the Natufians and the Qadan cultures, in the wake of an early ecological crisis.

ation with numerous 10,000-year-old human remains at Nataruk, in Turkana, Kenya, on the shores of a lake. All these sorts of records are of events that occurred long before any oral or written history, so evidence of causes is non-existent.

There is also archaeological evidence of more recent massacres: one of 34 people at Talheim around 5,100 BCE; at least 26 Neolithic people were killed by blunt force and arrow wounds in the Kilianstädten massacre around 7,000 BCE; and a massacre of more than 200 people in the Schletz area (Lower Austria) in about 7,000 BCE. There is therefore an assumption (based on extrapolations) that these massacres were not singular events but were actually more commonplace. So, by this era (around 12,000 years ago), these cultures seem to have engaged regularly in various forms of warfare. Again, there may have been predominant external factors that raised tension and triggered latent aggression

We also have several written accounts of early warfare, like the story of Gilgamesh, the hero-king of ancient Mesopotamia, (set in c. 4,000 BCE, although written later); or the earlier parts of the Bible, like in the *Book of Exodus*, which records how Moses led the Israelites out of their slavery in Egypt, through the deserts of Sinai, and to their 'holy war' – the conquest of Canaan (the Promised Land) – events that happened possibly around 1,300–1250 BCE; or stories like the epic Hindu saga of the Mahabharata (c. 900 BCE); or those in the Ramayana, a Sanskrit epic (dated to between 800–400 BCE), which narrates the life of Rama, a legendary prince, that follows his 14-year exile and tribulations to a successful conclusion.

Reasons for War

For a long time, there were two main anthropological theories as to why humans might go to war: these can be labelled as “cultural ecology” and “cultural materialism”^[10] on one side and several other “-isms” on the other, that tended to prefer explanations that refer to social dynamics, differing ideologies, or other non-material factors.

Some materialists argued that societies undertake warfare only when forced to do so by competition over food or other essential resources. Peace is [therefore] the inertial or natural state to which societies revert when essential material needs can be cheaply supplied by nonviolent means. (Keeley, 1996).

These theories essentially posit that such primitive societies only went to ‘war’ under conditions of threat and/or opportunities for material advantage, but these are essentially developments of the now refuted ‘noble savage’ concept. The archaeological evidence suggests that the prehistorical tactics of warfare favoured raids and ambushes, as opposed to formal battles – which often yielded a high death-rate – and that adult males falling into the hands of their enemies were almost universally killed; and that surprise raids seldom spared even women and children. But the perennial question still remains: What causes War?

People – humans – are social animals and, as such, gather together in groups: these can be initially small extended family groups, collecting together in larger social groupings, settlements or villages. There is some evidence that warfare happens, even at this early stage of development, long before we get to-

10. ‘Cultural Ecology’ is the adaptation of a culture to a specific environment; ‘cultural materialism’ is the relationships between the physical and economic aspects of a particular society and the values and beliefs that predominate in that society.

gether in towns, cities, or countries. War is therefore a feature of early social groupings, going back tens of thousands of years. When and how did it start?

We have seen that there is some good evidence that chimpanzees conduct deliberate raids of neighbouring communities and that this can lead to the annexation of territory. However, Nicholas Newton-Fisher^[11] feels that this type of behaviour is more akin to the raiding of a guerrilla band, rather than a planned and executed battle. However, the Ngogo observations (mentioned earlier) put this into a more definite and possibly realistic context – our nearest relatives have a strong in-built, hereditary propensity for war.

The potential for aggressive group behaviour – as such – can therefore be traced back as far as our animal origins, even though modern chimpanzees are more like distant animalistic cousins (with only about 2% difference in our DNA). Various other animal groups do compete over resources, sometimes in an organised way, but “war” implies something much more organised.^[12] Unlike humans, chimpanzees and other large primates don’t usually seem to form into opposing armies, nor do two communities ally to defeat a third. So, the potential for aggression seems to be part of our animalistic nature: we might have to say goodbye to Rousseau’s ‘Noble Savage’ concept.

However, if we go back into what we know of our history, our first designated ‘enemies’ (or ‘Others’) were probably the Neanderthals and the reasons for warfare with them would probably be over the first homesteads and hunting grounds, originally occupied and used by the

Neanderthals, and then ‘taken over’ several thousands of years later by the ‘smarter’ but potentially ‘weaker’ Cro-Magnon incomers. Here, we can see the naturalistic beginnings of an “Us” and “Them” – the necessary differentiation that is able to justify the killing of “Others”. If the ‘Others’ are ‘different’, then they can be a threat. This triggers a ‘fear’ reaction, which takes us easily towards Sam Keen’s theories about how we might then need to demonize the “Enemy”, so as to justify killing him.^[13]

It is therefore possible to theorise a connection between: **(a)** the development of weapons (especially those that ‘distance’ us from our prey / enemies) and co-ordinated hunting strategies; **(b)** natural, protective aggression towards competing social groups; and **(c)** the beginnings of all-out war against “Others”. Yet the various Stone Ages (Paleolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic), having lasted several million years, ended somewhere about 5,000 BCE, with the ending of the last Ice Age, with a very significant climate change, and also with rising sea levels. These factors will have had a huge impact on resources and thus on competition for resources.

In this period of extreme change and significant hiatus, the existing peoples began to develop agriculture, permanent settlements and animal husbandry, to begin with in the fertile regions of: the Middle East (the ‘Fertile Crescent’ in Mesopotamia, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers), which gave rise to some of the world’s earliest civilisations; the fertile Nile valley; the similarly fertile Indus valley; and the Yellow River valley in China (see di-

11. Nicholas Newton-Fisher is a primate behavioural ecologist at the University of Kent. He was quoted in a National Geographic article by Liz Langley 30-Jan, 2016).

12. This article does not consider insects as ‘animals’. There is good evidence of insects, like wasps and ants, conducting ‘war’ on another colony.

13. Keen, S. (1986). *Faces of the Enemy: Reflections of the Hostile Imagination*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

agrams below). This period was followed by the much more technological Bronze Age, beginning about 4000 BCE, during which time bronze (a more resilient alloy of copper and tin) was discovered and widely used for weapons, tools and jewellery. The food surpluses generated other surpluses, mainly wealth; early cities were built, trade developed, and so did – probably / inevitably – greed, envy and war.



More modern theories about reasons – or justifications – for war, include those from Bennett & Stam (2009), who conducted a thorough

empirical appraisal of the plethora of theories, conjectures and hypotheses of conflict and concluded that a single theory is not helpful in understanding actual behaviour, so they focussed on what sets of theories seem valid, which required an appropriate research design for such an analysis.

However, these theories tended to focus on the different origins of modern wars such as: democratization; polity change and externalization of violence; alliances and membership of defence pacts; arms races; balances of power in nondirected dyads; conventional deterrents; democratic peace agreements; expected utilities; geographic contiguities; nuclear deterrence; transitions of power; trade interdependence; economic cycles; systemic power concentrations and movements; dangerous dyads and combined effects. They also point out that, despite these analyses and understanding it better, both from a theoretical perspective and from an empirical one, there has been no reduction in, or elimination of, the scourge – or pox – of war: ‘pox’ – as it almost has an infectious quality. However, these more modern theories also seem to accept warfare as being almost inevitable. This assumption was not really questioned until the 20th century.

Eventually, on October 24, 1945, at the end of the 2nd World War, the United Nations Charter came into force in an attempt to prevent international disputes from escalating into wars, and/or to help restore peace following the outbreak of armed conflicts, and – ideally – to promote lasting peace in societies emerging from war. Whilst it provides a unique platform for countries to meet each other in open forum, and whilst it may have helped end some conflicts and fostered reconciliation by conducting successful peace-keeping operations in dozens of countries, including: Cambodia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mozambique, Namibia and Tajikistan, there have also been about

60 interstate wars since 1945,^[14] so its success has been somewhat limited. There are now approximately 200 countries in the world.

All of these wars or conflicts (in one form or another) are the sources of immense human suffering and regional instability. All wars and conflicts destroy property, displace people, disrupt production of food, goods and services, and create violence and disorder: besides killing people. For what gain?

Since the Second World War (1939–1945), there have been wars that have included: the Indo-Pakistani war (1947); the Arab-Israeli war (1948); the Korean war (1950–53); the Vietnam war (1955–75); the Suez crisis (1956); the Israeli Six-Day war (1967); the Yom Kippur war (1973); the Turkish invasion of Cyprus (1974); the Cambodian-Vietnamese war (1975–1989); the Somali-Ogaden war (1977–78); the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988); the Falklands war (1982); the Invasion of Grenada (1983); the US invasion of Panama (1989–90); the Gulf War (1990–1991); the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia (1999); the US invasion of Afghanistan (2001); the invasion of Iraq (2003); the Russo-Georgian war (2008); the ‘military intervention’ in Libya (2011); the Russian “take-over” of parts of the Ukraine, including the Crimea (2014–now); and the current ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022). Estimated deaths in combat (since 1945) total between about 5 million (minimum) and about 10 million (maximum), and these figures do not include any civilian casualties.^[15] There are not any proper figures for these.

Furthermore, the above listing of so-called ‘interstate wars’ does not include so-called ‘civil’ wars, fought between organized groups

within the same state or country, which total about 450 conflicts or wars since 1945: these include armed conflicts, wars of independence, coups and insurrections, with currently about 30 on-going civil wars. These numbers also do not include protests and terrorist incidents. It is almost impossible to enumerate the numbers of people killed in such civil wars.

Many people flee such conflicts, as we have seen recently, particularly – most recently – in Syria and in the Ukraine. The UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency) estimates that there are currently well over 90 million displaced people, as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order.^[16] This figure does not include economic migrants.

The nature and type of this man-made disaster (called “War”) has also been changing in recent times. From direct fighting between countries, there is an increasing incidence of conflicts becoming internal, within countries. This trend results in much higher civilian casualties, with the use of terror to exert social control, if necessary, by disrupting the fabric of grassroots social, economic, and cultural relations (Bracken *et al.*, 1998). A good example of this is the present conflict in the Ukraine, with the Russian emphasis being on the destruction of Ukrainian cities and infrastructure. The sum total of human misery that all these conflicts entail is therefore appalling. As a species, we are inflicting this tragedy on ourselves (Somasundaram, 2006). There **has to be** some deeply serious pathology at work, or else – as a species – we are just totally insane, hell-bent on self-destruction, and very deeply damaged (wounded) or traumatised.

14. Interstate wars since 1945: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_interstate_wars_since_1945

15. The above totals do not include any figures for the US invasion of Afghanistan (2001).

16. www.unhcr.org/uk/figures-at-a-glance.html: plus about 5 million people from the Ukraine in 2022.

However, before any further and deeper explorations are undertaken about the causes and motivations of war, there also needs to be some consideration about the impact of trauma and possible trans-generational trauma and especially the perpetuation of traumatisa-tion through warfare.

A number of researchers have specifically identified some of the impacts of war and trauma, mostly on non-combatant civilians – the bystanders, the ‘collaterally’ damaged, the tragic casualties. These researchers include: Rathi (n.d.); Murthy & Lakshminarayana (2006); Raam & Balasubramaniam (2020); and Musisi & Kinyanda (2020). These articles make dire reading, and this is, perhaps, somewhat like identifying the problem after the event. The problem is that human beings – the currently predominant species on this planet – create war (frequently), and also suffer from it (massively). The question that no-one seems to be able to answer is ‘Why?’

Treatment

Before we jump in and try and help, let us take a somewhat wider perspective: otherwise, we are just applying a very small sticking plaster onto a huge, deep and long-lasting wound. No one of us, nor any small group, will be properly able to counteract the global effect of all these wars. Attempts are being made, within the United Nations, and by health professionals in reports, and by documentation and publications, to raise – and maintain – a consistent voice for peace. Unfortunately, the power of the armament lobby and the arms industry, as well as the rattle of the machine gun and the explosion of the bombs, tend to drown all these efforts out. Global military expenditure on armaments is about US\$ 550 billion

(or about 4–5% of world GDP), split between ‘home use’ and exports.

The arms trade (selling weapons to other countries) is worth about \$100 billion annually. The USA exports about \$10,000 million annually in arms expenditure (1st at about 45%); Russia about \$3,200 million; France about \$2,000 million; Germany & Spain about \$1,200 million each: ^[17] these figures do not include “military aid” – i.e., ‘gifts’ to other countries. A clear fact emerges here: our major industrial countries are making much too much money out of warfare to stop. Swords into plough-shares just doesn’t compute; neither does missile launchers into windfarms! We will not, or cannot stop, such a lucrative industry.

So, if we can’t stop war, then we should perhaps first examine how people survive, and have survived, naturally to date. What are the various ‘resilience building approaches’ of different communities and cultures, and how do they affect psychological healing of children, as well as adults, in the aftermath of war and destruction? Just as we don’t have the answer to “Why War?”, we don’t have the full answer to “How to Heal from War?” Therefore, further research – as Rathi claims – is needed:

Essential humanitarian efforts in the form of programs, resolutions, conventions, campaigns, and interventions, by various local and international NGOs and UN agencies, are addressing actual and perceived stressors with which non-combatants may be confronted. A common assumption in developed nations is that the Western ideas of psychological trauma, therapy, and healing are universal. Yet, Summerfield (1999) questions whether there is sufficient empirical evidence that Western models of mental health, medical, and technical solutions, which are tar-

17. Figures from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

geted at providing psychological aid to distressed populations in developing regions, trump the pre-existing cultural and religious coping strategies in those countries. ...

Wars are likely to continue and cause emotional distress. Additional empirical studies that focus on healing, promoting resilience, and incorporating cultural capacity builders are needed in order to provide appropriate and effective mental health services to future victims of war. (Rathi, p. 2-3)

However, the afore-mentioned traditional ('pre-existing cultural and religious') coping strategies are probably outdated and seriously ineffective. Perhaps, we need to move back – somehow – to more matriarchal and matrilineal societies that seem to be less aggressive.

As a psychotherapist, and particularly as a Body Psychotherapist, all of this is naturally of great interest in treating individuals. We now know that people 'store' trauma in their bodies, not just in the muscles (Reich, 1933, 1973), but also in the soft tissues (Keleman, 1983) and in their digestive systems (Boyesen, 2022). Traumatization – however minor – tends to stay locked into the body, and the psyche, and any subsequent traumas will just escalate these effects.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) – only properly recognised in the last century – is increasingly prevalent. It affects social behaviour and psychology and a person's physiology, as well, and therefore treatment is quite complex. There seem to be a plethora of therapists offering relatively 'quick-fix' solutions for trauma, but Bessel van der Kolk has said – in effect – that the only people knowledgeable enough to treat trauma effectively are Body Psychotherapists, because trauma is stored in the body.^[18] There are a number of body-oriented psychotherapists that seem to hold out

some hope for individuals, at least. These include: Pat Ogden, Deb Dana, Stephen Porges, Peter Levine, Dan Siegel, Babette Rothschild, Gabor Maté, Ruth Lanius, Allan Schore, Ricky Greenwald, Jan Winhall, Ken Wilbur, Susan Aposhyan, and many more, who all seem to offer ways in which to heal trauma – at least in individuals. However, no-one seems to be able to offer a solution for the whole human species: a way to heal (or stop) the tendency to go to war.

Trauma is very persistent and gets locked into the body; severe trauma in one member of a family can even traumatise others – so that trauma can often be seen trans-generationally. Given that only one (or two) animal species indulges in warfare, it is possible that this species (us, humans) could have been severely traumatized at some point in their development and, what we see now, is the phenomena of embedded, embodied, trans-generational trauma, that has been buried deep within the human DNA – for millennia.

We know that certain breeds of dogs are much more aggressive than others, so it is possible to 'breed' (genetically) for aggression. Humans may have war-like aggression buried back in history and deep in their DNA. Human society is therefore 'shaped' by warfare. However, Laidloff (1975) claims to have found an Amazonian tribe that did not have any words for anger or aggression, where any form of aggression was seen as an aberration and a dysfunctional, pathological result of (probably) poor mothering. So, it might also therefore be possible to 'breed out' aggression in humans, given sufficient time and sufficiently 'safe' social structures and positive environmental conditions. Matrilineal societies tend to demonstrate better chances of this than patriarchal societies.

18. van der Kolk, B.A. (2014). *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York: Penguin.

It is also possible that our views of war and aggression have been influenced by the suppression of earlier hunter-gatherer, possibly more matrilineal societies, who were less aggressive than the large-scale influx of Indo-Aryan, more patrilineal and nomadic cultures that came into Europe from Asia about 3,000 years ago. Some of the early myths and legends of Greece and Britain refer to the huge cultural shifts that happened in this era, coinciding with the Bronze Age – Iron Age transition, and how the pre-existing matrilineal cultures could not compete with the much more aggressive (and better armed) patrilineal incomers. However, we are currently left with a legacy that seems to view war as an almost inevitable ‘evil’.

Most modern wars are initiated by governments or by leaders, not by the actual populations; and most of the time, they are results of unresolved disputes over resources and land, or of a particular governmental group’s desires to increase their influence and power. But Steve Taylor comments that, *“looking back over the history of warfare, what is most striking is how willing most people have been to fight in wars, or at least to support them”*. He also comments: *“Warfare provides people with a semblance of psychological positivity in oppressed societies where other outlets are lacking”* and illustrates this with the example of how both German and British populations enthusiastically welcomed the outbreak of the First World War. The American psychologist, William James, once suggested that – at least the idea of – war is so prevalent, because of its initial positive psychological effect. For men, particularly, there is a power element in the thought of war.

Reich (1933) had a different view: we need a psycho-social revolution: *“If you try to change the structure of people alone, society resists. If one tries to change society alone, the people re-*

sist. This shows that not a single thing can be changed on its own.”

Peglau concludes:

“For our present time, this could be concretized as follows: adults should work on their inherited mental disorders – mostly by recourse to psychotherapeutic knowledge – and at the same time ensure that their children and grandchildren are spared from developing these disorders in the first place.

So, it is about accompanying children lovingly into life, actively striving for good and equal partnerships, fulfilled sexuality, and mental health. And it is about privately and publicly denouncing authoritarian norms that are hostile to life or even incite war in the family, school, profession, media, church, politics and state – and looking for like-minded people with whom to resist them.”

Therefore, it seems a good idea that humans might need to find activities that provide the same positive effects of warfare, but which don’t involve the same levels of devastation. This could account for the growth of competitive national and international sports, like football: a way of channelling aggression and competition. However – as we have just seen in 2022 – this isn’t fool-proof: the other ‘reasons’ for war (as mentioned above) can, unfortunately, sometimes overwhelm us – to our cost.

Ultimately, I do not feel that I have answered the primary question, of “Why War?” totally satisfactorily. I don’t even know if the (intellectual) answer – if there is one – would be useful. Any remedy would have to be applied universally, globally, and over many generations, in order to eliminate war. We might even have to make significant changes in our societies. I only know that, for as long as people want war, agree to go to war, support war, eulogise war, and pay for war, we will inevitably be stuck with it.

Author

COURTENAY YOUNG is a well-known Body Psychotherapist, who has also been working in the NHS around Edinburgh in Scotland for 20 years and been an active member of the EAP since 1996. He is also currently the Editor of the International Journal of Psychotherapy and a Trustee of the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP). He has written many articles (available on his website: www.courtenay-young.com) and has edited several books.

Email: courtenay@courtenay-young.com

References

- Amsler, S. J. (2009). Ranging Behavior and Territoriality in Chimpanzees at Ngogo, Kibale National Park, Uganda. U. of Michigan, Anthropology Dissertation.
- Bartlett, S. J. (2007). The Humanistic Psychology of Human Evil: Ernest Becker and Arthur Koestler sets. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, Vol. 48, No. 3, pp. 340–363.
- Bennett, D. Scott, & Stam, Allan C. (2009). *The Behavioural Origins of War*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Boyesen, G. (2022). *The 'New' Collected Papers of Biodynamic Massage & Psychotherapy*. Stow, Galashiels: Body Psychotherapy Publications (in press).
- Bracken, P. J., Petty, C., & Summerfield, D. (1998). *Rethinking the Trauma of War*. New York: Save the Children Alliance and Free Association Books.
- Chagnon, N. A. (1968). *Yanomamo: The Fierce People*. New York: Holt McDougal
- Ember, C. R., & Ember, M. (1994). War, socialization and interpersonal violence: A cross-cultural study. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 38(4), 6220–6246.
- Engelhaupy, E. (2016). How Human Violence Stacks Up Against Other Killer Animals. *National Geographic*, 2016. www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/human-violence-evolution-animals-nature-science
- Ferrill, A. (1985). *The Origins of War: From the Stone Age to Alexander the Great*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Freud, S. (1933). *Why War? Letter from Freud to Einstein*.
- Fromm, E. (1973). *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. New York: Holt, Reinhart & Winston.
- Gat, A. (2006). *War in Human Civilization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Keeley, L. H. (1996). *War Before Civilisation: The Myth of the Peaceful Savage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Keleman, S. (1983). *Emotional Anatomy*. Berkeley, CA: Center Press.
- Kelly, R. C. (2000). *Warless Societies and the Origin of War*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Laidloff, J. (1975). *The Continuum Concept*. London: Arkana.

- Lemoine, S., Boesch, C., Preis, A., Samuni, L., Crockford, C., & Wittig, R. M.** (2020). Group dominance increases territory size and reduces neighbour pressure in wild chimpanzees. *Royal Society Open Science*, 7200577. doi.org/10.1098/rsos.200577
- LeShan, L.** (1992). *The Psychology of War: Comprehending its Mystique and Madness*. Chicago: Noble Press.
- Murthy R. S., & Lakshminarayana, R.** (2006). Mental health consequences of war: A brief review of research findings. *World Psychiatry*, 5, 1, 25030.
- Musisi, S., & Kinyand, E.** (2020). Long-Term Impact of War, Civil War, and Persecution in Civilian Populations – Conflict and post-traumatic stress in African communities. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 11, 20.
- Pearce, E., Stringer, C., & Dunbar, R. I. M.** (2013). New Insights into differences in brain organization between Neanderthals and anatomically modern humans. *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*, 280: 20130168.
- Peglau, A.** (2023). *Are We Born Warriors?* Lecture series: “Psychological Anthropology: Militarism and War”, University of Cologne, 30 June, 2023. andreas-peglaue-psychoanalyse.de/are-we-born-warriors/#_ftn33
- Raam Kumar, T., & Balasubramaniam, P.** (2020). Psychosocial Impacts of War and Trauma in Temsula Ao’s ‘Laburnum for My Head’. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 12, 5.
- Rathi, A.** (n.d.). Psychological Impact of Victims of War and Conflict. *American Psychological Association*.
- Reich, W.** (1933, 1973). *Character Analysis*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Somasundaram, D.** (2006). The Tragedy of War. *World Psychiatry*, 5, 1, 36–38.
- Taylor, S.** (2014). Why do human beings keep fighting wars? *The Guardian*, 5–Aug. 2015.
- Turney-Hugh, H. H.** (1949). *Primitive War: Its Practice and Concepts*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- Wilkinson, H.** (1998). Editorial: war, and peace, and sheer confusion. *International Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 3, No. 3, pp. 213–219.
- Wilson, M. L., & Wrangham, R.W.** (2003). Intergroup Relations in Chimpanzees. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 32, 363–392.
- Wrangham, R., & Peterson, D.** (1996). *Demonic Males: Apes and the origins of human violence*. Mariner Books.
- Young, C.** (2010). *A Physiological Theory of Evolution: 1.2*. Internet article available: cortenay-young.com/courtenay/articles/A_Theory_of_Evolution_1.2_.pdf