

**Abstract:** This article uses a discussion of the relationships between war, peace and “human nature” in the First Supplement of Kant’s *Perpetual Peace* essay to make a wider observation about the interplay of the three concepts. It starts by outlining the argument concerning the inevitability of war and the evil of human nature in the *Perpetual Peace* essay, and then reconstructs the reasoning of the First Supplement to show the role which nature — and human nature in particular — plays with it, underlining its two crucial flaws: a pragmatic one and a theoretical one. It then widens the scope of the analysis to show that these fundamental flaws represent general problem in our understanding of the reasons of war. Finally, pointing to more contemporary attempts to frame the term “human nature” present in biological discourses, it sketches a possible alternative to the Kantian argument that although human nature is “evil,” it is only through it that can we foster conditions of perpetual peace to come.

**Keywords:** Human Nature, Nature, Perpetual Peace, Peace, War

## Introduction

Kant’s argument concerning the historical possibility of the conditions of perpetual peace, laid out in the famous First Supplement to the *Perpetual Peace* essay, rests on a specific understanding of human nature — one that, as I show in this text, is untenable today. Importantly, this untenability is not only based on some biological or empirical understanding of nature (human or otherwise) that Kant might not have had given the biological knowledge of his time. Rather, it rests on a fundamental change that has happened in our scientific (but not necessarily political and philosophical) understanding of what *kind* of thing we refer to when we talk about human nature. As I show in the paper, this profound change not only puts into question the Kantian argument itself, but also requires a change in

our understanding of the relationships between war, peace and human nature — and, *a fortiori*, between the natural and the political — providing an avenue into transcending an important limit to political imagination.

I proceed by first outlining the argument concerning the inevitability of war, which is shared by thinkers against whom the *Perpetual Peace* essay is written — and, in some of its elements, also by Kant himself. This helps to situate Kant’s essay in context and show the stakes of the reasoning laid out in the supplement. Next, I reconstruct the reasoning of the supplement to show the role which nature — and human nature in particular — plays with it; I argue that even the most benevolent reading of the fragment does not remove the fundamental flaw on which this argument is based. In the next section, I widen the scope of the analysis to show that this fundamental flaw is not restricted to Kant or his time, but rather a more general problem in our understanding of the reasons of war. Finally, pointing to more contemporary attempts to frame the term “human nature,” I show a possible alternative to Kant’s reasoning.

## Inevitable War

There is a number of possible arguments that say why perpetual peace is impossible. A resource argument would say that both resource scarcity and abundance will, in the right circumstances, lead to conflict.<sup>1</sup> “Clash of civilizations” arguments would suggest that irreconcilable differences between cultures, or indeed the proclivity of some cultures to value warrior behavior highly, inevitably lead to wars.<sup>2</sup> But the strongest possible argument — or the strongest argument in a secular world — would insist that permanent or even perpetual peace is impossible, because war is somehow natural or, even worse, embedded in human nature itself.

By calling this argument “strongest” I do not mean that it is necessarily true, nor that it is necessarily the most convincing; in fact, I leave these matters on the side for most of this article. What I mean is that *if it were true*, it would mean the strongest possible sense in which war is inevitable — while we may imagine a world in which the distribution of resources is “just right” (whatever that would mean in practice), and we may imagine a better cultural alignment or understanding, if war is something embedded in nature itself, a world without war would cease to

<sup>1</sup> Vesco P., Dasgupta S., De Cian E., Carraro C., 2020. Natural resources and conflict: a meta-analysis of the empirical literature, *Ecological Economics* 172. doi: 10.1016/j.ecolecon.2020.106633.

<sup>2</sup> Huntington S. P., 1993. The Clash of Civilizations?, *Foreign Affairs* 72(3). doi: 10.2307/20045621.

be a natural world. Or, at least, if war is something embedded in *human* nature, then for a world without war, humanity would need to undergo a change undreamed of by anyone except perhaps the most adventurous posthumanists.

The belief in the naturalness of war is shared by cynics who make a point of assuming that man is in essence evil, and of idealists whose dreams are shattered each time another war inevitably breaks out. Hobbes' "war of every man against every man,"<sup>3</sup> as a natural state of human existence is often mentioned in this context; this may be problematic because of two factors that remain important for this text as well. Firstly, it is highly debatable if Hobbes even believed that such a state ever existed — it is rather posited as a hypothetical benchmark as to what would happen if we did not give up some of our freedom to a sovereign power. Secondly, and more importantly in this context, it is even more debatable if a free-for-all sticks-and-stones brawl can be called a war.

How does Kant's *Perpetual Peace* figure in this context? There are several ways in which we can situate Kant essay historically, for example acknowledging earlier similar texts, especially the *Projet pour rendre la Paix perpétuelle en Europe* (Project for Bringing about Perpetual Peace in Europe), by Abbé de Saint-Pierre first published in 1712 and then widely circulating in abridged versions.<sup>4</sup> We can also note that its chronological closeness to the French Revolution, an event to which the Königsberg philosopher had a generally positive attitude (even though he dismissed violence as a way to bring about political change), which could suggest that the essay was a way for Kant to involve himself in a more public way in the discussion of current political events.<sup>5</sup> This suggestion is corroborated by the lighter style of the piece — at least if we measure it by other works of Kant. As W.B. Gallie says: "It is unique among Kant's writings in that it was written for a wide public, and that its publication can be regarded as a political act"<sup>6</sup>

However, for the problem at hand, it is more important to situate Kant's essay through highlighting its polemical edge — in other words,

<sup>3</sup> Hobbes T., 1998. *Leviathan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 85.

<sup>4</sup> Scheid, D. E., 2011. Perpetual Peace: Abbé de Saint-Pierre. In: Chatterjee, D. K., ed. *Encyclopedia of Global Justice*. Dordrecht: Springer.

<sup>5</sup> This "publicist" understanding of Kant's essay, focussing on the topicality of the subject in the late 18th century, is underscored, e.g., in Kupś, T., 2024. Kant's Project of Perpetual Peace Today. *Studia Philosophica Kantiana* 13(1).

<sup>6</sup> Gallie, W. B., 1978. *Philosophers on Peace and War, Kant, Clausewitz, Marx Engels and Tolstoy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 8.

given that it is, in fact, a political act, understanding what *kind* of political act it is and against whom or what kinds of ideas it is situated. Kant himself puts it quite clearly in another text from the period, “A Renewed attempt to answer the question ‘Is the human race constantly improving?’”, in which he summarizes the stance on human nature taken by the “clever statesmen” of his time:

One must take men as they are, they [=our politicians] tell us, and not as the world’s uninformed pedants or good-natured dreamers fancy that they ought to be. But ‘as they are’ ought to read ‘as we have made them by unjust coercion, by treacherous designs which the government is in a good position to carry out.’ For that is why they are intransigent and inclined to rebellion, and why regrettable consequences ensue if discipline is relaxed in the slightest.<sup>7</sup>

Kant, therefore, situates himself against the supposedly “cynical” argument, according to which men are by nature evil and we must treat them “as they are” and accept that the occasional outbursts of malevolence will happen, and the only way to make them rarer is to put them under strict surveillance and discipline them as intensely as possible. As Howard Williams puts it, giving names to philosophers who represent this way of thinking: “We can surmise that Kant believed that Grotius, Pufendorf and Vattel were taking for granted the presence of war in international society (as evidence of our inherent evil) rather than questioning it and asking how it might be removed”.<sup>8</sup> As Williams adds, “The ‘sorry comforters’ of just war theory pride themselves on their acquaintance with the way of the world and contrast it with the presumed naivety of those who seek security without war”.<sup>9</sup> The name itself, “sorry comforters” is derived from the book of Job, and refers to Job’s friends, who made it their life’s mission to make sure that their understanding of God’s justice is not spoiled by their friend’s hardships.

However, while Kant opposes the cynics who believe that there is nothing to be done about the evil or malicious side of human nature, he seemingly agrees with them on one point — namely that such a malicious or evil side exists. As he admits in the *Perpetual Peace* essay, “A state of Peace among men who live side by side with each other, is not the natural state.

<sup>7</sup> Kant I., 1991. Idea for a universal history with a cosmopolitan purpose. In: Reiss H.S., ed. *Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 178.

<sup>8</sup> Williams H., 2012. *Kant and the End of War. A Critique of Just War Theory*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 63.

<sup>9</sup> Williams, H., 2012. *Kant and the End of War*, *ibid.*, p. 64.

The state of Nature is rather a state of War.”<sup>10</sup> At another point, he claims that an “inclination” to war “seems to be implanted in human nature.”<sup>11</sup> Whether we call it the “radical evil” of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, or the “unsocial sociability” of the “Renewed attempt,” Kant recognizes in the human an evil based on egoism, the tendency to care only for one’s own interest at the cost of everyone else’s.

The main difference between the reasoning of Kant and that of his opponents does not lie, then, in a more optimistic view of human nature as it is; it lies, rather, in the conclusions he draws from how this influences human behavior and human history. This is presented most clearly in the famous “Guarantee” in the “First supplement” to the *Perpetual Peace* essay.

### **(Human) Nature<sup>12</sup> and the Guarantee of Perpetual Peace**

Full of awe for nature, Kants “guarantee” may seem, for the contemporary reader, like a page from a creationist handbook:

in the cold, icy wastes around the Arctic Ocean there grows the moss which the reindeer scrapes forth from beneath the snow in order that it may itself become food, or that it may be yoked to the sledge of the Ostiak or the Samojan. And in like manner, the wildernesses of sand, barren though they be, do yet contain the camel which appears to have been created for traveling through them, in order that they might not be left unutilized.<sup>13</sup>

In fragments such as these, one can clearly distinguish a providential view of nature, something whose key function is to serve man and the goals of humanity.

More importantly, it is this same providential nature — through a seeming ruse of reason — that made men go to war in the first place. How to go from this place of war to the place of peace, especially when Kant says that “War [...] requires no special motive for its explanation; it appears to be ingrafted on human nature and is even regarded as noble

<sup>10</sup> Kant, I., 2010. *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (1795). Edited by Lambert G. Syracuse and Philadelphia: Slought Foundation and the Syracuse University Humanities Center, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Focussed as it is on the *Perpetual Peace* essay, this article presents only a partial appraisal of the chronologically varied understandings of human nature that can be found in Kant’s philosophy. For a more thorough analysis of how the philosopher’s views on anthropological matters changed throughout his career, see e.g., Bosáková, K., 2024. Moving Around the Question of the Human. Was Kant an Anthropological Philosopher?, *Studia Philosophica Kantiana* 13(1).

<sup>13</sup> Kant, I., 2010. *Perpetual Peace*, ibid., p. 26.

in itself, man being stimulated to it by the love of glory without regard to selfish interests.”<sup>14</sup>

The answer, for Kant — much as this might seem as unnatural a means as there may be — is money. Thanks to the establishing of states, men stopped being at so-called war with each-other, and decided to constrain themselves to be good citizens. In the same vein, states will someday understand that a peaceful federation is more profitable for all involved than war. As Kant concludes,

Among all the means of power subordinate to the regulation of the State, the power of money is the most reliable, and thus the States find themselves driven to further the noble interest of peace, although not directly from motives of morality. Hence wherever war threatens to break out in the world, the States have an interest to avert it by mediations, just as if they stood in a constant league with each other for this purpose. Thus great combinations with a view to war can but very rarely occur from the very nature of things, and still more rarely can they succeed.<sup>15</sup>

This, of course, is not the guarantee of peace itself, but rather a guarantee that there are “conditions of Perpetual Peace by the mechanism involved in our human inclinations themselves; and although this is not realized with a guarantee that is sufficient to enable us to prophesy the future theoretically, yet the security involved is sufficient for all practical relations.”<sup>16</sup>

There have been debates as to the status of this explanation “from nature,” with Kant’s own theories in particular providing some possible guidelines. Are we supposed to understand the providential nature of nature at face value, i.e. as a force akin to the aforementioned ruse of Reason, which, having its own plan and will, overcomes the seemingly “natural” tendency of man to go to war? Are we supposed to understand it — again, in a literal reading of Kant’s text — as the fulfillment of the “final purpose of human nature”, i.e., a reason-based, peaceful society? While both of these interpretations can find textual support, it is clear that they are untenable from the point of view of today’s understanding of nature because of their naively providential character.

But there are two more benign ways to read Kant’s claim about nature’s role in the bringing about of peace. One of them, perhaps a bit more subtle, would point to the understanding of the purposefulness of nature

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

that is present in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*<sup>17</sup> — in short, while a scientific analysis of nature needs to understand it as a causal system, we cannot help to see it *as if* it had a purpose. In this sense, although we understand it is thoroughly unscientific to say that nature gave us roses so that we can express love, it is perfectly normal to look at a rose and see a flower that was created for this very purpose.

This type of reading would make Kant's guarantee of perpetual peace resemble the vision of nature present in James Lovelock's Gaia theory.<sup>18</sup> In Lovelock's interactive understanding of living processes it is key that they are not only shaped by their environment, but also actively shape it so that the living Earth starts behaving like an organism, i.e., is capable of maintaining conditions that are key for life, e.g., a high enough level of oxygen in the air. Similarly, the egoistic human nature in Kant, although in itself not meaning to produce conditions of peace, does produce them, since they are what best serves the needs of human nature itself.

A somewhat simpler kind of reading — but equally useful for the purpose of aligning Kant with a more contemporary and Darwinian view of nature — is represented, for example, by Luigi Caranti.<sup>19</sup> Caranti suggests that Kant's text, far from being a simplistic teleological exercise, is in fact focused on how seemingly natural processes and rational actions of governments that do not necessarily have perpetual peace as their goal, nevertheless foster conditions of peace. In other words, while Kant's awe of nature may be overly exaggerated, his analysis of the causes and effects of human political behaviors is very much down-to-earth. Caranti's argument is that many of processes we see today in fact confirm many of Kant's intuitions — he focusses mainly on the peace- and democracy-promoting nature of trade and commercial relations in general. However, the “today” that he is writing his book in — the year on the cover is 2017, but some chapters appeared as early as 2011 — is very different from ours, with one of his primary examples being the supposed democratization of China that followed its decision to be more open in trade relations with the rest of the world and to allow for a more capitalist-oriented economy. Today's China, lead by who some call “Mao with money”,<sup>20</sup> is very far from

<sup>17</sup> Kant, I., 2000. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 68 – 73.

<sup>18</sup> Lovelock, J. E., 2016. *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>19</sup> Caranti, L., 2017. *Kant's Political Legacy*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>20</sup> E.g., in a quotation from a “longtime observer” of Chinese issues in Osnos, E., 2023. China's Age of Malaise. *The New Yorker*, October 23 [Accessed 2024-08-10]. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/10/30/chinas-age-of-malaise>.

the optimistic projections of the 1990s and early 2000s that Caranti seems to echo. More recently, Russia’s full-blown aggression on Ukraine directly points to the fiasco of the idea that economic exchange in itself brings nations together and fosters peace.

Regardless, however, of the rightness or wrongness of these predictions, the very fact that such a reading — as well as the Gaia reading — is possible and plausible, show that Kant’s misgivings and naiveties about nature, fundamental as they are, are not the main problem we should currently have with the understanding of nature present in his texts.

This main problem is visible in Caranti’s reading. As said above, he explicitly rejects any intentionality of nature; however, he keeps another key aspect of the Kantian view, namely “the mechanism of unsocial sociability with its consequences for the evolution of human institutions, at the domestic and international level”.<sup>21</sup>

Unsocial sociability, a somewhat paradoxical mechanism that Caranti alludes to, is explained by Kant in his “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose” as a twofold tendency in human nature. Man is, on the one hand, a social creature who seeks out companionship and community — this is one of the roots of political life as such. On the other hand, an opposite tendency is also present in the human, an “unsocial characteristic of wanting to direct everything in accordance to his own ideas”.<sup>22</sup> The discord and ambition that lead from the second characteristic are also the mechanism behind the human conquering of nature described in the “First Supplement” to the *Perpetual Peace* essay. And the sociable instinct, in itself, leads to the creation of just, modal institutions, which in turn leads to a better society: “The justice of institutions gradually permeates individuals’ souls, and they in turn adhere more authentically and steadily to the principles on which their government is based, thereby generating further institutional progress”.<sup>23</sup>

However, the mechanism of “unsocial sociability” — and a similar thing can be said about the “radical evil” of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, — is in itself a problematic concept, and not because of any directly empirical evidence that can be brought against it; it is, in fact, questionable, if such a conception of human nature can be overturned thanks to empirical evidence (I come back to this problem towards the

<sup>21</sup> Caranti, L., 2017. *Kant’s Political Legacy*, *ibid.*, Chapter 7. (As references are made to an unpaginated Kindle edition, only chapter numbers are given)

<sup>22</sup> Kant, I., 1991. *Idea for a Universal History*, *ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>23</sup> Caranti, L., 2017. *Kant’s Political Legacy*, *ibid.*, Chapter 6.

end of the article). This conception is problematic because it defines human nature as something universal and wholesale, singular to humans but belonging to each human in the same way. As Dipesh Chakrabarty notices with regards to what he calls the “standard account of the modern subject in European political thought” that in these discourses “[h]uman nature [...] was as universal as the biological human body”.<sup>24</sup>

While Chakrabarty makes this claim with explicit reference to Smith and Hume, the same is true about Kant, it is also a part of the pattern of explaining human nature and its relationship to war (and peace) that can be found in the work of a number of thinkers — the “sorry comforters” not withstanding — and is also present today. I explain this pattern more thoroughly in the next part of the text.

### Natural War, Future Peace

While a detailed and exhaustive assessment of the characteristic pattern of explaining human nature and its relationship to war and peace — focusing on a supposed “dark side” of human nature and a remedy that is linked to various elements of “progress” — is well beyond the scope of this text (as well as my ability), it might be a good approximation for the needs of the problem at hand to focus on a few examples by well-known authors.

One such example is the classic 1932 exchange between Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud on the reasons for the existence of war. Einstein, after considering a few other options and analyzing the means through which people can be incited to go to war, either by their own states or by arms-producing lobbies who profit from conflict, in the end lands on a familiar trope as to why men are indeed so ready to take part in the fighting: “Because man has within him a lust for hatred and destruction. In normal times this passion exists in a latent state, it emerges only in unusual circumstances; but it is a comparatively easy task to call it into play and raise it to the power of a collective psychosis”.<sup>25</sup>

An important addition to this argument is added in the conclusion of the piece, where Einstein notes that he is “well aware well aware that the aggressive instinct operates under other forms and in other circumstances”<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Chakrabarty, D., 2000. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 129.

<sup>25</sup> Einstein A., Freud S., 1964. Why War? In: Strachey J. – Freud A. – Strachey A. – Tyson A. – Richards A., eds. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XXI, p. 201.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 201.

(such as civil wars or racist persecution). Einstein’s notion is, then, that regardless of the cultural and political factors driving the existence or even promotion of war, the ease of this promotion must hinge upon a basic instinct which allows for these promotions to sink in — pretty much in the same way as fast food commercials would have been useless if we were not drawn to food containing a lot of fats and simple carbohydrates in the first place. Moreover, much as in Kant it is the same “unsocial sociability” instinct that makes us look at each-other with far-reaching cautiousness and go to war with each-other, for Einstein it is the same instinct that drives aggression towards one-another and all-out war. The only solution to this problem lies not only in the “superficial” (as Einstein puts it) action on the political level, but also a deep change in human psychology, or indeed human nature, itself.

Einstein must have known enough of Freud’s writings to understand that Freud will agree on this point. Indeed, Freud’s answer points not only to the existence of such an instinct of destruction, but situates the instinct theory of psychoanalysis in a double, mythical and biological context, which further strengthens the thesis of the fundamental nature of what drives us to war. Moreover, thanks to the ins and outs of psychoanalytic theory — especially the notion that instincts or drives can manifest in ways not consciously understood by those in whom they manifest themselves, Freud can also explain why going to war is often and rightly understood as a positive, idealist or noble thing:

When we read of the atrocities of the past, it sometimes seems as though the idealistic motives served only as an excuse for the destructive appetites; and sometimes – in the case, for instance, of the cruelties of the Inquisition – it seems as though the idealistic motives had pushed themselves forwards in consciousness, while the destructive ones lent them an unconscious reinforcement.<sup>27</sup>

And again, when trying to propose a solution to the problem of war, he points to a way to master the instinctive evil of human nature through cultural means. In Freud’s understanding, the work of civilization is to change the goal of the instinct of destruction from the original one to one that is more sublime.

As an aside, it is also worth remembering that in psychoanalytic theory, given its “hydraulic” conception of the psychological apparatus, there are

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

limits to the sublimation or at least to the suppression of instincts that is beneficial for civilization. While quite a few psychoanalysts and thinkers taking psychoanalysis seriously underscored this problem after Freud especially in the 1960s (with Herbert Marcuse and Wilhelm Reich being perhaps the most known), one can still happen on that view in more recent discourse. For example, here is a fragment worth considering in this context taken from the French psychoanalyst Elizabeth Roudinesco's talks with Jacques Derrida:

"I am always worried that we are moving toward the construction of a sanitized society, without passions, without conflicts, without insults or verbal violence, without any risk of death, without cruelty. When one claims to be eradicating something on one side, there is the risk of its resurgence where it isn't expected".<sup>28</sup>

In other words, too much suppression leads to an outburst, too much culture, too quickly, and the evils of nature will show themselves. We cannot remove the aggressive instincts altogether, or even remove the outlets of those instincts too quickly, because a resurgence will happen somewhere else.

One might argue that at least in the case of Freud the structural similarities between his and Kant's theory — a belief in some kind of "evil" in human nature and an argument that somehow other forces present in human nature may overcome this evil — are simply caused by the fact that Freud is appropriating a Kantian argument. There is a fragment in his text that might suggest that, using even the notion of "perpetual peace" (even if it has not been translated thusly in the Standard Edition): "Paradoxical as it may sound, it must be admitted that war might be a far from inappropriate means of establishing the eagerly desired reign of 'everlasting' peace ('ewigen' *Friedens*) since it is in a position to create the large units within which a powerful central government makes further wars impossible".<sup>29</sup> (The next sentence, invoking another Kantian motif, claims that this is untrue in practice while theoretically plausible).

While it may well be possible that Freud had been inspired by Kant, it does not explain why he would choose to follow his thinking in the first place had he not been convinced that this is indeed the right pattern for explaining the prevalence of war. More importantly, this pattern of explanation can be found in other sources, in whose case the Kantian inspira-

<sup>28</sup> Derrida J., Roudinesco E., 2004. Violence Against Animals. In: *For What Tomorrow: a Dialogue*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 75.

<sup>29</sup> Einstein, A., Freud, S., 1964. *Why War?*, *ibid.*, p. 207.

tion is much less plausible. For example — and the importance of referring to this particular group is made clearer below — in texts and statements of prominent neodarwinists. E.O. Wilson cites research according to which “Territorial expansion and defense by tribes and their modern equivalents the nation states is a cultural universal. The contribution to survival and future reproductive potential, especially of tribal leaders, is overwhelming, and so is the warlike imperative of tribal defense”.<sup>30</sup> Richard Dawkins, when explaining the ethical stakes of the selfish gene theory, makes the following statement: “Let us try to teach generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish. Let us understand what our own selfish genes are up to, because we may then at least have the chance to upset their designs, something that no other species has ever aspired to”.<sup>31</sup> This means that even if we are selfish (or even “nasty”, as he says in his documentary, *The Fifth Ape*) by biology, we can remain less so by culture.

While this evidence is not and cannot be exhaustive, it seems that a very cautious thesis can be put forward about the structure of understanding war and peace with reference to human nature again, namely that this structure rests on several fundamental points:

1. There exists a key part of human nature which we can identify as aggressive, greedy or outright evil;
2. Is firmly embedded in human nature on its most fundamental level;
3. It is holistic — it is a single mechanism that determines all “bad” behaviors from interhuman aggression to all-out war and its presence makes it easier for bad-willing political actors to incite people into war;
4. It is opposed in a binary way to something “cultural” — either Reason or another kind of instinct;
5. The only way to peace is to use culture to counter the evil part of human nature;
6. The only way to achieve success is to work slowly, so that gradual acceptance of “cultural” influences roots itself deeply in humans, thusly changing their nature or at least underscoring its “better angels”.

Stylistically, these explanations often contain a touch of the poetic or even mythical — it is no surprise that Kant alludes to the book of Job and his “sorry comforters”, nor that psychoanalysts talk about Greek gods, Eros and

<sup>30</sup> Wilson, E. O., 1999. *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. New York: Vintage Books, p. 185.

<sup>31</sup> Dawkins, R., 2006. *The Selfish Gene. Thirtieth Anniversary Edition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 3.

Thanatos. It might well be that one of the reasons of the popularity or plausibility of these kinds of explanations is that they take us deep into the historical roots of our Western self-understanding, tap into our Western cultural habits of translating history into metaphysics.

However, they also make peace into a dream of the future, a distant possibility that will present itself so long as we keep on the current course and — curiously — not move forward too quickly, lest a resurgence happens where we least expect it. The promise that peace will come in the future, that sometime it will be possible to have perpetual peace is, in fact, producing conditions of the perpetual *postponing* of peace. Since the virtuous circle is turning, this philosophical posture invites complacency. It is also suspect from the point of view of equality — those countries or nations who are at war can easily be cast as backwards or underdeveloped when it comes to the progress of human nature. This vision, thus, seems suspicious from a pragmatic point of view.

But much more importantly, there are also grounds to critique it from a theoretical, not just pragmatic standpoint. This critique, I believe, should start with what I called the “holistic” aspect of so-called “human nature”.

### Complicating Human Nature

The term “human nature” is, of course, problematic in itself. As Michel Foucault noted in his debate with Noam Chomsky, which I use to exemplify two important understandings of the term: “In the history of knowledge, the notion of human nature seems to me mainly to have played the role of an epistemological indicator to designate certain types of discourse in relation to or in opposition to theology or biology or history. I would find it difficult to see in this a scientific concept”<sup>32</sup>

In other words, Foucault suggests that if we use the term “human nature” or espouse a certain view of human nature, we are rather always already taking a side, signaling that we are subscribing to a certain type of discourse, maybe even playing a certain language game. This is, perhaps, not far from the truth, since today’s discussion about using the term “human nature” can be — simplifying only slightly — summed up as a zero-sum fight between the “Tim Ingolds”, who claim that there is no “human nature”<sup>33</sup> and the

<sup>32</sup> Chomsky N., Foucault M., 2006. *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate on Human Nature*. New York: The New Press, pp. 5 – 6.

<sup>33</sup> See Ingold, T., 2006. Against Human Nature. In: Gontier, N. – Van Bendegem, J. P. – Aerts, D., eds. *Evolutionary Epistemology, Language and Culture*. Dordrecht: Springer. doi: [https://doi.org/10.1007/1-4020-3395-8\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/1-4020-3395-8_12).

“Steven Pinkers” who claim the exact opposite<sup>34</sup>. More importantly, while the two camps both use the term “human nature,” they are, in fact, speaking about two very different things. We can see this difference already in the discussion between Foucault and Chomsky, when the latter gives his understanding of human nature as a: “collection, this mass of schematisms, innate organizing principles, which guides our social and intellectual and individual behavior”.<sup>35</sup>

Chomsky of course has in mind the schematisms of language, but anthropologists, psychologists and biologists who are still keen on using the term “human nature” have painted a much more complex picture of the matter, with Richard Dawkins’ idea behind the term *The Selfish Gene* being perhaps the most extreme example of this tendency of radical atomisation. E.O. Wilson, another hero of sociobiology, puts it thusly: “[Human nature] is the epigenetic rules, the hereditary regularities of mental development that bias cultural evolution in one direction as opposed to another, and thus connect the genes to culture”.<sup>36</sup> Or, as Stephen Peter Rosen puts it, human nature is “the aspects of human cognition that are affected by biological inheritance, as those inherited factors are shaped by human interaction with the environment”.<sup>37</sup> This means that in this understanding human nature is formed of a number of general, genetic rules that make humans react in a certain way to certain environmental factors — it is not strict genetic determinism, but rather epigenetics: to understand human nature, as understood by the sociobiologists, one must understand the connections between the genes and the environment, including the cultural environment people create for themselves. Incidentally, if understood correctly, this *kind* of concept of human nature does not necessarily need to be anthropocentric, as was often the case with traditional ideas behind human nature. Or, at least, it does not actively seek to be anthropocentric.

This is not meant as a defense of sociobiology — I will not rehash the many deserved critiques this movement has received, also from the side of some geneticists; we have already seen that in the case of war, at least some sociobiologists still cling to the old “man is evil” explanation. I am rather trying to point to the fact that this kind of understanding of what used to be called “human nature” can be productively used to complicate

<sup>34</sup> See Pinker, S., 2016. *The Blank Slate*. New York: Viking.

<sup>35</sup> Chomsky, N., Foucault, M., 2006. *Debate on Human Nature*, *ibid.*, pp. 4 – 5.

<sup>36</sup> Wilson, E. O., 1999. *Consilience*, *ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>37</sup> Rosen, S. P., 2005. *War and Human Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 3.

philosophical understandings of war and peace, which in turn could undermine the general, simplified story I have been diagnosing in discourses from Kant (and even Grotius) to Freud and beyond.

Some of this work is already being done. A short glance at the research of the problem of war in evolutionary anthropology, neuropsychology and other domains shows the multitude of ways in which the problem is posed and the multitude of candidates for mechanisms which are responsible for war. Such mechanisms may include the already mentioned territorial expansion;<sup>38</sup> cultural rewards for participating in warfare<sup>39</sup> or outright self-sacrifice;<sup>40</sup> “Emotion, stress, and hormones”,<sup>41</sup> which influence the mindsets of state leaders and other decision-makers. Also, since war – especially modern war, which makes it clearly distinct from the Hobbesian supposedly natural “war of all against all” – is a highly cooperative activity, the research on the biological underpinnings of war needs to take cooperation into account as well; in this regard, we are very different from other primates;<sup>42</sup> also, the relative rarity of intergroup conflict in humans makes some researchers suggest that it makes sense to study the evolution of peace rather than war.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, biologists considering Neo-Darwinian explanations – which generally focus on inheritable traits and mechanisms – too simplistic, raise the “need to think [war and peace] in terms of human systems and niches, not specific adaptations”,<sup>44</sup> complicating matters even further.

While these examples can be multiplied, the point is clear enough – the classic argument that there is something in “our nature” that leads us to war is of little value, not because we are not, as a species, aggressive – there is aggression in many species, so why not ours – or that we do not have something “evil” within us, but rather because it is impossible to soundly pinpoint this “something evil”; and, *a fortiori*, it is impossible

<sup>38</sup> Wilson, E. O., 1999. *Consilience*, *ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>39</sup> Glowacki, L., Wrangham, R. W., 2013. The Role of Rewards in Motivating Participation in Simple Warfare. *Human Nature* 24. doi: 10.1017/S0140525X22002862.

<sup>40</sup> Wrangham R. W., Glowacki L., 2012. Intergroup Aggression in Chimpanzees and War in Nomadic Hunter-Gatherers. *Human Nature* 23. doi: 10.1007/s12110-012-9132-1.

<sup>41</sup> Rosen, S. P., 2005. *War and Human Nature*, *ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Tomasello, M., 2011. Human Culture in Evolutionary Perspective. In: Gelfand, M. J. – Chiu, C. – Hong, Y., eds. *Advances in Culture and Psychology: Volume 1, Advances in Culture and Psychology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195380392.003.0001.

<sup>43</sup> Glowacki L., 2024. The evolution of peace. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 47. doi:10.1017/S0140525X22002862.

<sup>44</sup> Fuentes, A., 2013. Cooperation, Conflict, and Niche Construction in the Genus Homo. In: Fry, D. P., ed. *War, Peace, and Human Nature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 91.

to link a behavior as complex as war to a single psychological or genetic factor, or even to a finite and stable set of factors – or, indeed, as the need for cooperation and the double-edged nature of some of the mechanisms responsible for war<sup>45</sup> make clear, to a set of traits that we could unequivocally classify as “evil” or even “bad”. Such an argument does not mean that such factors should not be researched by scientists, but rather that philosophical explanations of war should take the complexity of those possible factors — and thus both the complexity of war and the complexity of “human nature” — into account.

## Conclusions

I started this text by situating Kant’s *Perpetual Peace* essay in its polemical context. In doing that, I showed that while it is purportedly opposed to theorists who propose an inherent evil in human nature which needs to be controlled in order to preserve peace — and that even these control measures will not be enough to achieve it — it does share with them the belief in this inherent evil. Kant’s original stance with regards to these thinkers lies in proposing a mechanism through which nature sets this inherently evil tendency to work against itself, thus producing conditions for perpetual peace. However, Kant’s view of nature is problematic — not so much because he proposes a providential and teleological view of nature (as this can be reconciled with our current understanding of evolutionary processes), but rather because of two other ideas: (1) that even though we can engage in working towards perpetual peace, the natural process that brings about its possibility is necessarily long-term; (2) that human nature is understood as a single (and singular) factor which causes all evil, from individual acts of aggression to multinational war. Importantly, this general pattern of explanation is present not only in Kantian philosophy, but also in many discourses, including psychoanalysis and contemporary evolutionary theory. However, a serious engagement with evolutionary theory shows that it also proposes another possible understanding of human nature — as a set of complex mechanisms that depend on the interplay of genetic and environmental factors.

Such an understanding of human nature, in the context of war, opens up several avenues that could lead to meaningful further research: (1) Even if they are (somewhat understandably) striving for general reason-

<sup>45</sup> Sapolsky, R. M., 2018. Doubled-Edged Swords in the Biology of Conflict. *Frontiers in Psychology* 9(26 – 25). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02625>.

ing, philosophers should not treat war as something that is unified and especially explainable by a single factor coming from “human nature”; (2) Disconnected from such an understanding of human nature, war cannot be understood as a perennial struggle to which we are doomed — rather, each instance of war is a singular interplay of factors; (3) Conversely, it would perhaps be useful to think of peace in the same way — as a singular interplay of factors that can be brought about in the given situation; (4) Finally, to think conditions for perpetual peace, one should not rely on discovering a historical process which will end in a changed humanity, nor should one point to simple solve-all mechanisms like mutual trade. Rather, thinking the conditions for perpetual peace relies on the perpetual vigilance to the singular interplay of humans and their (political) environment.

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