

Christopher Coker, *Can War Be Eliminated?*

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War, it seems, is ingrained in the human condition. ‘Great Power war’ may be on the decline, but casualties continue to mount in armed conflicts that appear to be without end. This occurs not in spite of a vision for a more peaceful world, but within an ethos in which laws and moral principles that constrain war nevertheless permit it when the cause is just.

All of this begs the question, which Christopher Coker takes as the title of his most recent book, *Can war be eliminated?* Answers to this question vary, ranging from the claims that war is an *inevitable* dimension of human nature (Hobbes, Morgenthau),¹ that it is an *intractable* feature of an anarchical international system (Waltz, Bull),² or that it is driven by an *ineluctable* sentiment that war, even when it involves killing, is virtuous (Walzer, Der Derian).³ To this list, Coker adds that war is *inescapable* because it has proved itself to be “remarkably resilient.” (p. xiii) By resilience, Coker understands war to demonstrate “the capacity to maintain its core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances.” (p. xiv) This is not because war is “pathological” or “socially dysfunctional” – on the contrary, “it has played such a central part of the human story because it is embedded in our cultural evolution.” (p. xiv)

Evolution is the key to this perennial puzzle about the persistence of war. Although invoking evolution, Coker departs from the claim that war is the product of humans’ base animal instincts. Rather, for Coker war is what makes us human – it is what distinguishes the human species from other, even closely related, species. If evolution moves towards species specialisation, war, according to Coker, is a human specialty. Whereas others have sought to distinguish war as distinctly human in order to dislodge the sense that human nature was inherently bellicose, Coker seeks to reinforce it: “war remains ubiquitous because we are still in thrall to our inherent biology, and from the first day that our ancestors threw a stone in anger, tools then technology have enabled us to compete more successfully.” (p. 6) Coker is not suggesting that war should therefore be embraced. His argument is simply that

1 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (New York: Knopf, 1948).

2 Kenneth Waltz, *Theories of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill), Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

3 Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York, Basic Books, 1977), James Der Derian, *Virtuous War* (London: Routledge, 2009).

humans are beholden to war, at least “until such time as its evolutionary possibilities have finally been exhausted.” (p. 4)

War’s resilience is not just found in the historical record, in which war has been present since “we emerged from the hunter-gatherer stage of development” and continues in the contemporary period. (p. xiv) Rather war’s adaptability operates in a variety of registers, each of which Coker evaluates as a specific chapter in the book. Principal amongst these is the role of culture, defined as “the ability to pass on social skills,” amongst which war, as a robust social practice, is a central part of human evolutionary inheritance. (p. 1) Coker is keen to dispute the separation of culture from nature, whereby culture can overcome (deficiencies in) human nature with a set of powerful ideas. Rather, culture (chapter 2), he argues, is part of human evolutionary biology. It is akin to a genetic enhancer, and promotes adaptability through stories that “teach us basic social values and tend to encourage pro-social behaviour.” (p.28) Notable amongst the stories that humans tell are those of heroism and sacrifice, a ‘warrior motif’ in literature, film and increasingly videogames. Having been “woven intrinsically into the fabric of human psychology,” these stories confer adaptive value by imparting beliefs that diminish “feelings of hopelessness and despair and so [encourage] us to face the worst with the strength of will to carry on.” (p. 28) Converging “in much the same manner as biological evolution,” (p. 36) technology is the extended phenotype of human beings, without which both the capacity of war, and the human species more generally, could not be reproduced. Although war technology – for instance, drones and robotics – seem to be displacing the need for humans, Coker reflects on the way each of these technologies makes war more cerebral requiring more of the human mind, and thus of human beings, than before. If culture and technology establish war as a human trait, to what end is war fought (chapter 4)? The question is particularly salient in the context of arguments that economic globalisation makes war less likely because a disruption to trade would be costly for the vanquished and the victors. But, the geopolitical narrative is evolving as humans do. The contemporary trading state may not need formally to control (distant) territories for access to resources, but potentially compromised by climate change, a zeal for the territorial conquest may be renewed.

All of this brings Coker to the question of peace (chapter 5). If moral learning (the legacy of Kant) is necessary to make peace possible, peace is nothing but a “pious hope” with no realistic prospect. (p. 75) The only universal, argues Coker, is value, which each culture defines differently. The evolutionary argument gains force here as incommensurability wins the day. This is why war has persisted, and peace has perpetually been more elusive. Our essential humanity, the subject of the final chapter (chapter 6), returns us “to our evolutionary past – to in-group and out-group dynamics.” (p. 91) War might be a game, but Coker’s broader suggestion seems to be that we have been gamed, so to speak, as the legacy of our evolutionary biology suggests that “there are limits to how much we can change.” (p. 100) The human predicament is that bound to our “prehistoric past, ... we are unlikely to soon witness a major change of heart.”(p. 108)

Even with chapters on evolution, culture, technology, geopolitics, peace and humanity, Coker’s analysis is admittedly partial and incomplete. But it is surprisingly efficient at tackling the central issues in the debate over whether or not war is on the decline and on the verge of being eliminated. That war seems to be inescapable, despite our best efforts, is hard to dispute. Here Coker’s contribution is to force those

who see peace as a matter of education to probe more deeply into why peace has remained so elusive, despite, as it were, the better angels of our nature.⁴ Certainly, if we are rational beings capable of moral learning, then the consequences of war should have impelled us to abandon the practice. Should we not have reached the point of moral exhaustion that Kant proclaimed would prompt us towards perpetual peace by now? That we have not requires a different explanation, one that human evolution – not as an animal instinct but as a distinctive quality of human species being enabled by cultural practice, technology and emerging geopolitical imperatives – seems to explain.

But, even on his own terms Coker leaves much to be desired in terms of plausibility and persuasiveness. Telling a story about war does not inherently entail its celebration. Referring to women as more resilient soldiers (pp. 30–32) at a time when male soldiers' suicide rates (in the US military at least) are increasing, is not just dismissive of historical campaigns against discrimination but makes women valuable only as an instrumental means to an end. Technology may indeed provide new capacities for war, but as Coker himself acknowledges choices without values are meaningless. (p. 37) Nowhere is this more evident than in the laws of weaponry, which adjudicate between appropriate and inappropriate means of violence, no matter what may be available and efficient (consider, for instance, the ban on chemical weapons). Geopolitical rivalries may indeed persist, but how does one square that with the legal principle and protection of territorial integrity (which makes the Russian excursion in Ukraine absurd because it is the exception to a well-respected rule)? Why is it plausible to contend that the culture of war, despite its diverse manifestations, rests on a universal grammar that facilitates war, (p. 9) but a universal morality is preposterous to the point of making peace itself preposterous? And none of this is to touch on the ways in which an evolution seems excessively reductionist for an activity that requires the massively planned and purposive mobilisation of people, money and fear. As the number of contradictory claims and questionable conclusions mount, evolution begins to falter as an explanation.

The problem might be that Coker is hamstrung by the question of whether war itself can be eliminated. Forced to take a side (yes or no), the historical record certainly suggests that war not only wins over peace, but also that there is something unique about the human capacity to wage it. This certainly makes evolution an attractive explanation. That human beings have fought, extensively and even exceptionally, over the course of history might certainly be indicative, as Coker quotes George Kennan, of an 'ingrained habit.' (p. 107) But from the perspective of evolutionary theory, that war exists is not evidence that it is a central part of human nature. In other words, a habitual practice is not necessarily an evolutionary trait. Coker's argument thus rests on conflating a prevalent and persistent activity as a prehistoric and perpetual one. Even more, in an international legal and ethical context in which war is explicitly sanctioned but with restrictions, war appears to be less of a primitive action as it is a principled one.

Coker's evolutionary theory however is not just haphazardly applied, but hazardous. Central to his endeavour is to disrupt how the history of war has been described: that it is an exception to the regular activity of human beings or something that can be easily put to an end by learning to think differently. Defining history,

4 Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (London: Penguin, 2011).

of course, is no easy feat. According to Coker, the human aptitude for story telling and building narratives “give[s] history its shape and meaning” – indeed, it is “only through those narratives that history occurs” and through which “history renews its energy.” (p. 53) If this is the case, one wonders what kind of work evolution is actually doing. By all accounts, evolution (biological, cultural or psychological) is *the* historical narrative par excellence, proving less that war is a function of human nature and more that it has become a naturalised human activity,⁵ the ends justifying if not the means then at least the motivation. Put differently, evolution is not an explanation of why war has become recurrent or rational – it provides a way to rationalise it. Read as a narrative of history, Coker’s evolutionary explanation tells a story in which resilient warfare is not just inescapable but insurmountable. The danger is that war becomes not just difficult to eliminate – it lessens the possibility of limiting it. Evolution might make war more human (something Coker is perhaps wont to do),⁶ but it also makes it less humane.

5 c.f. William Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

6 Christopher Coker, *Humane Warfare* (London: Routledge, 2001).