

Letters

Warring theories

In "Gauging the Winds of War" (SN: 2/9/91, p.88), you state that "theories of innate aggression attract few advocates today" among anthropologists seeking to understand the purpose of war.

It seems to me that without our innate behavior, we have precious little left. War is just one manifestation of human aggression. You can see people striving to satisfy this urge on the highways, in the workplace and just about anyplace where crowds gather.

Our aggressiveness, coupled with the need to parent, eradicates elephants and rain forests. I haven't heard of any good reasons for creating the current mass-extinction event, but innate behavior explains it well. I would suggest that in the case of warfare, our expectations of the human brain exceed its ability to deliver. We won't soon control such urges.

Russell W. Agreen
Fulton, Md.

I am afraid that anthropologists' attempts to determine the common geneses of war will not be received as credible if they fail to recognize the indisputable fact that religious conflict historically has played a major role.

Perhaps some disciples of science are not willing to focus their objective analyses on the large portion of human behavior governed by "nonscientific" values. If anthropologists observe such a taboo, their first casualty will be truth.

Rob Blakeney
Concord, N.H.

It's quite clear throughout your article that men wage war. I wonder whether there have been any studies of matriarchal societies. In communities where women are at least equal in status to men and where deities include or are restricted to goddesses, I have a hunch that there is far less need to resort to armed conflict to resolve differences and gratify basic needs.

Deborah Feller
Psychotherapist
New York, N.Y.

In village societies where women exert considerable control over public and religious life, the same women also eagerly participate in the torture and killing of prisoners of war, says anthropologist Marvin Harris of the University of Florida in Gainesville. Harris argues that a lack of combat skills and control over weaponry — not the lack of masculinity — prevents women in these societies from brutally exploiting men in the same way men exploit women in male-dominated village societies. — B. Bower

Without denying the importance of the motivating factors discussed in "Gauging the Winds of War," I believe more fundamental principles better explain the history of warfare. Rather than looking primarily to the realm of material values for clues to the origins of war, we should be examining the realm of ideas — the philosophies and moral/ethical guidelines to which people turn.

The belief that it is proper to *initiate* force against other people in order to obtain some value from them — whether those values are physical or intellectual — underlies all armed conflicts from the level of the tribe to that of the nation-state. Whether those conflicts are be-

tween one tribe and another, one nation and another or even between two groups within a nation (as in civil wars), the denial of individual rights in favor of the interests of some group, of whatever size, leads to the conclusion that it is permissible to sacrifice the lives of those individuals to that group. By definition, a statist or collectivist society denies the rights of the individual to his life or property. With that principle in place, there is no reason why a tribal chief or a communist dictator should not feel it proper to attack, loot and destroy the lives and property of his neighbors.

The discovery of the nature of individual rights is an historically recent one. It is denied by most countries in the world and, unfortunately, by many people in the United States. As long as large numbers of people believe it is their right to use the coercive powers of government to enforce their will on other people, warfare will continue.

Russell Madden
Iowa City, Iowa

Rather than regarding warfare as a distinct human activity, standing alone as it were, it seems more meaningful to view it as an area on a wide spectrum of cooperative, competitive human activities. Humans are by nature social creatures who cluster into groups deeply inclined to compete with other social groups. Violence, either real or threatened, is only one aspect of warfare. Intense intergroup competition and intense intragroup cooperation are also salient features of warfare. These three aspects are present in many other human activities.

In addition to cooperative competition involving violent contact, there are cooperative, competitive activities involving nonviolent physical confrontation, such as basketball and soccer, and competitive group activities in which vigorous physical interaction is not present, such as a match between two high school chess teams.

War is a human social activity and should be regarded among a variety of such activities.

Joseph Forbes
Pittsburgh, Pa.

For a discussion comparing group solidarity and individual self-interest as driving forces in human behavior, see "Getting Out From Number One" (SN: 4/28/90, p.266). — B. Bower

Infertility spawns ethics debate

Jana Hollingsworth (Letters, SN: 2/16/91, p.99) finds it "almost obscene that so much effort should be directed toward allowing a few middle- and upper-class couples to have children" and suggests that these couples adopt older, nonwhite and handicapped children to avoid contributing to overpopulation. While I share her fears for a severely overpopulated world, I am concerned that she has somehow attributed this crisis to fertility research ("Zona Blasters," SN: 12/15/90, p.376). The infertile are least likely to contribute to overpopulation; many struggle to conceive a single child. An effort to ease the world population crisis by preventing future fertility research is clearly misdirected.

I support Ms. Hollingsworth's endorsement of adoption as a more Earth-friendly choice than producing biological children. On the other hand, any prospective parent is free to choose adoption rather than birth to build a family, but the majority do not and are socially

and financially encouraged to choose birth over adoption. Infertile couples deserve the same support and respect for their decisions. Everyone is entitled to reproductive choice; denying access to fertility research "on moral grounds" is in essence the same as denying access to contraception.

I hope Ms. Hollingsworth does not believe that only the affluent suffer from infertility. Her observation that this research benefits only a "few middle- and upper-class couples" is true at present, because treatment is available only to those who can afford it. This is not the fault of fertility research but of a health insurance system that generally does not recognize reproductive dysfunction as meriting coverage.

Victoria Coats
Portland, Ore.

Jana Hollingsworth's suggestion that infertility should somehow motivate and equip couples, both psychologically and financially, to raise older, "hard-to-place" children is naive at best. While this is a potentially immensely rewarding avenue open to some couples, many are not prepared to handle the difficulties associated with raising an older child with a physical handicap or significant behavior problems, often related to a history of neglect or abuse.

It is an injustice to such children to suggest that infertile couples should automatically be awarded the awesome responsibility of raising them, purely on the basis of a desire to parent and an inability to have a child biologically.

Jeanne Hartman
Garden City Park, N.Y.

In his letter to the editor, Stuart McElhinney rightfully raises the question of ethical responsibility regarding infertility research, making the provocative point that there may be unknown cellular mechanisms at work. But why should treating a correctable physiological shortcoming of the reproductive system be more objectionable than treating other physiological defects? Should preventive and curative asthma research be questioned because asthma may be genetically perpetuated if the victim lives?

This ethical question is a small facet of the more general ethics of any medicine that preserves life beyond that which "natural events" would otherwise bestow. While infertility research might possibly turn out to have some negative genetic results, what of the positive effects? I know many who would be overjoyed with a successful outcome of these studies.

John and Teresa McCurdy
Columbia, Mo.

Contrary to the claims of Stuart McElhinney, Kathy Fackelmann did provide the ethical justification in her article "Zona Blasters" for the experiments aimed at overcoming certain types of infertility: They offer a chance for couples to conceive a desperately wanted child. *That* is the only legitimate ethical issue here.

More broadly, the practical applications of science — its benefits to human life — are the ethical justification for *any* scientific research. There is no such thing as what McElhinney calls "interesting science" if the application of that knowledge is proscribed.

Bennett C. Karp
Aberdeen, N.J.