

### Book Review

#### The Peacemaking Primate?

A review of *The Human Potential for Peace: An Anthropological Challenge to Assumptions about War and Violence* by Douglas P. Fry, 2006 Oxford University Press.

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In *The Human Potential for Peace*, Douglas Fry challenges advocates of a “dark-sided, demonic view” of humanity who allegedly believe that “humans (especially human males) are a bloodthirsty mob, prone to be violent and warlike by nature” (p. 5). Fry marshals an impressive array of anthropological evidence to convince readers that humans “are not really so nasty after all” (p. 246), concluding that humans deserve to be known as the “peacemaking primate” (p. 251). This change in the assumptions we make about our species is crucial because, according to Fry, such “cultural beliefs” about human nature are a primary determinant of human behavior (p. 2). Thus, replacing the Hobbesian view of human nature with a peacemaking one will significantly contribute to a reduction of war and violence, and all that is required for this shift is an understanding of anthropological evidence. Unfortunately, several problems with this argument need to be addressed before we all rejoice in this happy news and the Nobel Peace Prize is awarded to the discipline of anthropology.

The various problems with the book all stem from Fry’s decision to structure it as a contest between two supposedly opposite views of human nature, instead of a straight-forward presentation of his massive array of anthropological data on both violence and peace. The first consequence of the unfortunate structure of the book is that it leads Fry to cast his argument in language designed to win an argument, but that also makes most of his claims untestable. When arguing for his peaceful view of humans he consistently uses vague and ambiguous phrases such as “the potential,” or “the capacity” for peace, often made even more imprecise by the addition of adjectives such as “strong” or “tremendous.” What evidence can determine whether humans “have a tremendous capacity for resolving conflicts without violence” (p. xv) or just a moderate capacity to do so? Even more frustrating is Fry’s consistent reference to his opponents as holding the view that war and violence are natural and

therefore “immutably fixed in ‘human nature.’” (p.247). Although this view may be held by some members of our population, it is an unfair characterization of the writers his book is actually challenging. Ghiglieri (1999) does focus on the “dark-side” of man, and Wrangham and Peterson (1996) do describe males as “demonic,” but neither of these works holds that human violence and warfare is inevitable.

Not surprisingly, Fry’s decision to frame his book as a polemic also leads to apparently biased presentations and interpretations of some of the anthropological data. Consider rape. Although most people would consider this topic to be central to the subject matter of the book, Fry’s only substantive statement about rape is that anthropologists have demonstrated that it is universally “condemned by members of the group” (p. 262). This is true, but it also implies that rape occurs in all known societies, a point emphasized by the sources Fry cites (Brown 1991; who cites Palmer 1989). Further, these sources also stress the need for extreme skepticism regarding cross-cultural studies claiming to show societies lacking negative behaviors such as war, violence, or rape. Such a level of skepticism is noticeably lacking in Fry’s own discussion of cross-cultural studies reporting the existence of relatively peaceful societies (p. 86-96).

Fry’s interpretation of the universal occurrence of rape as evidence for the tremendous human potential for peace is an example of a curious form of argument used throughout the book, much of which is a description of human violence and aggression. For example, in Table 8.4 readers learn that either warfare, feud, or self-redress revenge homicide is “typical” of all human societies (p. 112). Further, even if readers accept Fry’s assertion in the same table that self-redress revenge homicide is rare in state-level societies, they will later learn that our current social and political world corresponds closely to something called the “Pervasive Intergroup Hostility Model”(p. 184). The argument that the widespread existence of human violence is somehow evidence for the enormity of the human potential for peace reaches a pinnacle of absurdity in Fry’s attack on Derek Freeman’s critique of Margaret Mead’s description of Samoa. Given that Fry is arguing that humans have a tremendous potential for peace, one might assume that Fry would present evidence that Samoa was much more peaceful than Freeman asserted. Instead, Fry spends an entire chapter arguing that Freeman misrepresents Mead’s writings on aggression and war in Samoa because “*Mead did not emphasize the unaggressiveness of Samoans in the first place*” (p. 122: emphasis in original). Thus, Fry presents the existence of violence, aggression, and even warfare in Samoa as evidence that the human potential for peace is greater than people think.

A straightforward presentation of the data on human violence and peace would have been much more useful to researchers actually trying to reduce war and violence by identifying its causes. However, such a presentation would have made for a much less dramatic book. This is because it would have revealed little if any difference between Fry’s view of human behavior and those he portrays as his opponents. Perhaps the only point of actual disagreement between Fry and some of the other authors writing on the same topic concerns the use of the word “war.” Fry

is correct that some authors (e.g. Ghiglieri, 1999) may have applied the term “war” more broadly than conventional usage so that it includes forms of interpersonal aggression and violence that are not commonly referred to as war (p.164). Pointing out such unconventional word usage is certainly worthwhile, but it hardly justifies the polemical tone of Fry’s book because once this semantic issue is settled nearly all researchers in this area would probably agree with what appear to be Fry’s main points about humans. For example, I think nearly every evolutionist studying this subject would agree with Fry that interpersonal aggression and violence are human universals and products of our evolutionary history.

There would also be widespread agreement that warfare *per se* is not an adaptation because warfare in the sense of large-scale socially organized armed combat between members of different territorial units did not occur in our species until several thousand years ago, due to the absence of the required forms of social organization. It is also hard to imagine disagreement over the proposition that there is cross-cultural variation in the frequency of both aggression and various forms of violence such as homicide, revenge killing, raiding, feuding and warfare. There would, furthermore, be near unanimity that humans often avoid violence and have ways of bringing violence to an end. Finally, I suspect that nearly all anthropologists would agree with Fry that it is *possible* for humans to exist without engaging in war.

The only real question of importance is how is the possibility of peace is to be operationalized? This is where we encounter the most important consequence of Fry’s polemical approach. Although he claims to be an advocate of evolutionary explanations of human behavior, Fry provides what is essentially a very nonevolutionary, cultural determinist explanation for the causes of current warfare, arguing that because war *per se* is too recent to be an adaptation, it must be a product of cultural beliefs. This position makes the mistake of thinking that identifying the ultimate cause of a trait (e.g., determining that a trait is a by-product instead of an adaptation) implies a specific proximate cause of a trait (e.g., that the trait is caused by culture).

As Fry himself emphasizes, humans (especially human males) have evolved numerous adaptations designed for violence and aggression. Instead of assuming that these adaptations are largely irrelevant to the proximate cause of warfare, a much more plausible assumption is that war is the result of an interaction of these adaptations with numerous novel environmental factors and other adaptations involved in such activities as the formation of coalitions. This alternative explanation would also help solve an even more fundamental problem with Fry’s argument: If the existence of a cultural belief in the naturalness of warfare is what leads to warfare, how did such a cultural belief come about in the first place?

This fundamental question lurks below the surface of Fry’s seemingly optimistic conclusion that humans deserve to be known as the “peacemaking primate.” There is some justification for applying this moniker to our species because humans have indeed developed an impressive array of rituals, laws, police forces, fines, prisons, moots, summits and song duels to try and avoid or end forms of

violence ranging from fistfights to world wars. But why was such great effort at peacemaking necessary? Or, more to the point, what does the existence of all of these elaborate peacemaking practices imply about both the human potential for peace *and* the human potential for warfare and other forms of violence? Fry's explanation of warfare will only be convincing to readers who fail to ask these questions.

This is not to argue that our species has been entirely unsuccessful in our peacemaking. In fact, the current prevalence of large-scale modern warfare would not have been possible if we had not had significant success at managing smaller scale forms of violence. The point is that any significant reduction in warfare and other forms of human violence will likely come from explanatory models aimed at accurately portraying the behavior of our species. Arguments, like Fry's, that human beings are more peaceful than some people allegedly thought are likely to be of little use, and to the extent they lead to false solutions, may even be counterproductive.

This does not mean that Fry's book does not make a contribution. Stripped of its unnecessary polemics and flawed theoretical arguments, it offers a useful, if somewhat biased, summary of the anthropological evidence concerning human violence. Further, Fry is correct in thinking that the mechanisms of peacemaking hold important clues to how a more peaceful world may come about. However, to benefit from these it will be necessary to profoundly revise Fry's argument about the role of culture in human evolution and in the development of an individual's behavior. The numerous cultural peacemaking rituals and institutions contradict Fry's contention that war is the result of a cultural belief that war is natural and inevitable, but they point to a potentially much more useful alternative view; namely, that cultural traditions influencing a person to resist many tendencies toward hostility and violence have been crucial to human survival, reproduction, and the leaving of descendants for thousands of years.

Abandoning the cultural belief that warfare is inevitable, if indeed such a belief was ever widely held, is likely to do little to reduce violence and war. That need not be a cause for pessimism, however, because peace can be made more likely by identifying, maintaining, emphasizing, and perhaps modifying those cultural traditions that promote self-restraint and cooperation, which Fry has effectively described despite the other flaws in his book.

## **References**

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Douglas Fry responds:

<http://peacefulprimate.blogspot.com/2006/09/craig-palmer-has-written-attention.html>