

Review of The End of War, by John Horgan (2012)

John Horgan's view is that humans choose to make war therefore they can choose not to make war. In most of the book he examines all the pros and cons of scientific theories as to why humans choose war. In the end he observes, "Scientists have tried, in vain, to trace war to a single cause or set of causes—whether genetic, ecological, economic, political, or cultural."

The chapter headings indicate the arguments he describes, i.e. "War is not innate." Is the human being genetically wired for violence? Is the male basically aggressive? To all this Horgan says "no," using various sources. Among them a United Nations statement drafted by scientists saying that it is scientifically incorrect to say we have inherited violent tendencies from our animal ancestors; to say that violent behavior is genetically programmed the human being; that in human evolution there has been a selection for aggressive behavior; that humans have a "violent brain," and that war is caused by "instinct" or any single motivation. (pg 30)

In the chapter "You can't blame it all on a few bad apples," he comes to the conclusion there will always be those who like war (2%), but most people do not. People kill not because they want to but because they are docile and follow the leader. People also do not usually even go to war due to resource scarcity, Hogan observed. Warlike cultures are however infectious. Often warriors are honored and admired in their culture. But, in general, war breaks out at random without conforming to any laws or patterns.

We can "choose peace." Many societies, which were once warlike, have renounced war, writes Hogan, and he gives various examples throughout history, such as Costa Rica, which disbanded their military in 1948. Just as we have abolished slavery so can we abolish war and Western society is showing signs of doing just that, Hogan claims. He wonders if democracy encourages peace or vice versa and comes down on the latter. He quotes several pessimists as well as optimists about the decline of war. He is an optimist or an idealist, as some would say.

In the good chapter "The Power of Nonviolence" Hogan discusses the various non-violent solutions societies have practiced throughout history, which we often don't know about or forget. He mentions the author Gene Sharp, who was often vilified for his nonviolent stance, but still has influenced many people all over the world. Hogan writes, "A major goal of Sharp's work is to get people to realize that they have more power—more choices—than they think they do." (153) Sharp advocates nonviolence for practical rather than spiritual reasons, though he is a Quaker. "He rejects religious exhortations that we should turn the other cheek and love our enemies." Powerful people often do need to be fought, but not violently, which often leads to greater injustice and suffering. Horgan believes that, in spite of their mistakes and weaknesses, the United Nations is the best instrument to bring about the abolishment of war. Religious institutions and secular groups can also aid in encouraging nonviolence and ways of abolishing war. Humans have a free will, Horgan claims, and we must exercise it to make war obsolete. "Just imagine other infinite possibilities available to humans with their resources, their intellect, and most importantly, their creativity!"