

[A Neurophilosophy of Fear-Induced Pre-emptive Aggression & Pseudo-Altruism](#)

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This is post eight in a short-term series by Prof. Nayef Al-Rodhan titled “Neurophilosophy of Governance, Power and Transformative Innovations.” This series provides neurophilosophical perspectives and multi-disciplinary analyses on topics related to power and political institutions, as well as on a series of contemporary transformative technologies and their disruptive nature. The goal is to inspire innovative intellectual reflections and to advance novel policy considerations.

Many events unfolding in contemporary international politics highlight the need to link theories of International Relations (IR) to the neuropsychological and neurochemical processes that determine human actions. There are many possible entry-points to this subject, but a careful look at central causes of aggressive (and hence destabilizing) behavior should be prioritized given its geopolitical repercussions. To understand both individual aggressive behavior and its geopolitical corollary of state-level aggression, it is first important to analyze human nature, and the human capacity for altruism, as well as consequences of fear. This analysis makes it clear that a number of salient concerns in IR—the balance of power, security dilemmas, and nuclear deterrence among them—can be meaningfully explained with reference to neuroscience and neurophilosophy.

Human Nature Revisited: a neurophilosophical perspective

Neuroscience has debunked many long-held beliefs about human nature and notably about the false dichotomy between rationality, on the one hand, and emotionality, on the other. I have discussed this at length in other previous posts and I will only briefly recall here some of the key neurophilosophical concepts and paradigms developed before. With insights from neuroscience, I previously theorized that human nature is [emotional, amoral and egoistic](#).

For a start, and contrary to a significant body of literature, the ‘marginal’ role given to emotions and *emotionality* in conceptualizations of human nature (and the negative connotation that emotions are a hinderance to ‘rational’, clear thought) is not supported by neuroscience. Quite the opposite, emotions play a critical role across cognitive functions and emotional processing is widely localized in the brain and in clear overlap with decision-making features. Furthermore, there is very little in

neuroscience to support the premise of inborn morality or immorality. Rather, it is *amorality* that defines us, as we are born with no predefined moral notions and our moral compass is shaped in the course of existence and as a result of circumstances in our environment. We are only minimally equipped with some inborn and hardwired predispositions, the most fundamental of which is for survival, which is what I defined as a basic form of *egoism*.

Human nature is thus highly malleable to circumstances and forms of [governance](#) will make the difference between us choosing the path to social cooperation, moral and altruistic acts, or conversely, to survival-focused, aggressive and immoral behavior. We cannot, as a result, take morality for granted, nor be complacent about the virtues of human nature in the absence of institutions that gear human behavior and limit the excesses of our emotional amoral egoism. Accountable governance therefore must mediate between our nature and the aspiration for morality and social cooperation and to do so, *human dignity must be central to governance*. What I mean by dignity is not merely the absence of humiliation but a more comprehensive set of nine dignity needs, which include: reason, security, human rights, accountability, transparency, justice, opportunity, innovation and inclusiveness.

The neurophilosophical account of human nature as emotional, amoral and egoistic also hints at the drivers of human action and what it is that most motivates and shapes human decisions. I previously grouped these together in what I called the '[Neuro P5](#)', which includes: power, profit, pleasure, pride, permanency. These aspects of human nature are critical to shape a clearer, more evidence-based understanding of human nature, and thus one that goes beyond speculative accounts. They are also paramount to engage with political philosophy and the legacy of other philosophers in a more nuanced manner.

Conditions of Fear

The seminal thought of Thomas Hobbes provides an instructive beginning point for the political implications of fear. Despite the importance of later critiques from Locke and others regarding Hobbes' advocacy of highly centralized power, Hobbes' insights specifically regarding behavior in conditions of anarchy are far-reaching. As Hobbes argues under his heading of "Distrust," which is widespread in his conception of [the state of nature](#), "Because of this distrust amongst men, the most reasonable way for any man to make himself safe is to *strike first*, that is, by force or cunning subdue other men—as many of them as he can, until he sees no other power great enough to endanger him." This is particularly true when one is "diffident" as Hobbes somewhat eccentrically uses this term to imply doubt in one's own abilities to mount a defense. Taken together, a lack of trust in one's fellows coupled with a concern about one's defensive capacities logically recommends taking the offensive. Moreover, Hobbes reminds readers both that a state of war persists at all times when and if an established superior power is absent (whether or not there is currently a clashing of swords) and that, as a pragmatic point, no one's defensive capacities are individually sufficient: the mightiest can be overthrown by guile or by a small temporary alliance bent on his downfall.

Neuroscience has provided additional considerations to this offensive posture presented by Hobbes. [Fear](#) is a very complex emotion, neurobiologically speaking, and its manifestations take several forms, depending on the "content of the threat". These will range, from the full activation of the 'panic system', to forms of anxiety and others fear and survival circuits (which are often linked to adaptive behaviors: simply, we need to adapt to survive). While survival and avoidance of physical pain constitute a powerful motivator to 'strike first', as Hobbes would advocate, there are other powerful motivators of human nature that determine other kind of responses to fear. The Neuro P5 motivators mentioned above (power, profit, pleasure, pride and permanency) offer a glimpse into

other social and political dynamics that are developed as a response. It is, in other words, not only aggression in the form of a “strike” that is prompted by fear but also heightened reactions to satisfy some of the other motivators, and this includes accumulation of profit and power as a way to counter fear.

The neurochemistry of power is also, at times, explained by this pre-emptive response to fear. Power is neurochemically mediated by a release of dopamine, the same chemical involved in the feeling of pleasure and many reward neurocircuitries (see other previous [posts](#)). Given this neurochemical conditioning, experiencing power will entail a search for more power and the attendant ‘highs’ associated with dopamine release. This is where institutions and accountable governance play a fundamental role in limiting the extremely dangerous search for ever-more power, which left unchecked, will know no boundary – and certainly will not be curtailed by any self-imposed limits. Indeed, power is [highly intoxicating and addictive](#), much like any drug. Leaders who enjoy absolute power – such as in dictatorships – will do anything to maintain it, including reckless acts that may not even be in their interest in the long run. Human behavior in the face of unlimited power can take extreme and pathological forms, including compulsive behavior, paranoia or acts of cruelty. Confronted with the fear – real or imagined – of loss of power, these leaders will do anything to enhance their power and ensure it remains undisputed.

Pseudo-Altruism

As I have [argued elsewhere](#), the mechanistic theory of Hobbes heavily emphasizes nature with little room for consideration of the influence of nurture, or indeed for human freedom. For our purposes there are two relevant points here: first, that Hobbes, naturally having no real insight into neuroscience, neurochemistry, or contemporary neuropsychology, underestimated the plasticity of the human mind, and thus the greater potential for “nurture” to be determinative of human nature. The second point is closely related. Hobbes conceptualized human beings as self-interested in a nearly totalizing way, and the realization of the social contract was seen as a strict function of rationally pursuing one’s self-preservation. Indeed, for Hobbes the inversion serves as a classic *modus tollens*: not being able to recognize the value proposition in giving up ‘natural’ freedoms to gain political freedoms is symptomatic of not being rational.

This iron-clad relation between rational self-interest, as Hobbes understood it, and the benefits to the individual acquired by escaping the state of nature make it the case that apparently selfless acts are in fact instances of what I previously called [Pseudo-Altruism](#), as the possibility of genuine altruism— not directly undergirded by considerations of self-interest—is conceptually closed for Hobbes. Taking into consideration insights from neuroscience that have emerged much more recently, the truth lies part-way between him and the later theories of Locke. Though he lacked the evolutionary explanation for it, Hobbes was correct in supposing that we possess hard-wired survival instincts—a minimal set of inherited drives I describe as a [predisposed tabula rasa](#). These minimal attributes modify Locke’s famous *tabula rasa*, with which he rightly dismissed inherited moral concepts, but also mistakenly ruled out survival instincts as part of our human nature.

Both Hobbes and Locke also fall into the historical trap of privileging rationality over emotionality, an error which depends upon the prior misconception that the two notions are sharply distinct. There is by now a sizable literature impugning the assumption that our rational egos dominate the vast majority of the time, with only occasional slips of weakness that allow our emotions to inappropriately gain the upper hand. To the contrary, [rationality](#) turns out to be frequently invoked in post-hoc justifications for feelings and decisions our emotional apparatus have already determined. Equally important, this literature demonstrates that the emotions properly understood are themselves

inferential, blurring the line between what were once thought attributes of 'clear rational thought' and 'emotional distortion.' Taken together with the aforementioned predisposed tabula rasa, these later insights yield the conception of human nature as amoral emotional egoism – briefly introduced above.

While this updated understanding acknowledges the possibility of genuine (as opposed to pseudo-altruism), it concludes that such instances are necessarily the exception. Only in conditions of relative political stability (well beyond a Hobbesian state of nature) where the dignity needs of individuals can be reliably provided, should we expect moral behavior to be widespread. Therefore, while Hobbes limits the potential for (genuinely) altruistic behavior and under-emphasizes potential contributions from the "nurture" side of the nature versus nurture dichotomy, he rightly emphasizes the crucial importance of background circumstances for the development of moral sensibilities.

Fear-Induced Pre-emptive Aggression in International Relations

At the level of state interaction, there are two closely related analogs to the Hobbesian framework. The first is [the 'balance of power,'](#) a notion that has occupied the minds of theorists from Vattel to George Kennan. The basic concept is straightforward: regional (or potentially global) powers hold one another in check simply in virtue of constituting formidable adversaries for one another. Theoretically and conceptually, this can be framed by applying the analogy man-state, which undergirded Classical realism, and which portrays states as a reflection of the character of man (and that meant, in the framework of Realism, that states are selfish and power-maximizing).

However, the incomplete and rather unidimensional view on human nature described in Realism is reconsidered in neurophilosophy – and the theory of emotional amoral egoism – and thus by extension states too can be described as [emotional, amoral and egoistic](#). While survival and self-interest are key to state behavior, alliance-building and strategic choices reflect a wide emotional repertoire, and what is often taken at face value as 'rationality' includes complex emotional inputs. Fear and fear-driven behavior have often been central to those considerations.

Thus in the War of Spanish Succession, for example, the prospect of a united Franco-Spanish behemoth under King Philip led Britain and other regional powers to attack merely on the basis of preventing a dramatic shift in Europe's balance of power, and in particular one that would consolidate one power that would be able to dominate all others. The collective fear of an outsized rival posing an existential threat at some future date motivated 'preventive war'—widely characterized as an unjustified act of aggression—on the part of the Allies. Vattel's post-conflict commentary is of particular interest here, given his acknowledgment of the role fear played in the decision-making of the allies. The Swiss scholar/jurist [wrote](#) when it came to light that there was no real plot for European domination, "...it has since appeared that the policy [of the Allies] was too suspicious."

While the ways in which fear plays a role in multilateral political decision-making are no doubt reticulate and complex, 'balance of power' concerns represent a clear instance of geopolitical outcomes being influenced by fear. This historical example is hardly isolated. The logic of the balance of power gained prominence particularly in the years of Napoleon's reign and near total domination of Europe. Meeting at the Congress of Vienna in 1814-1815, the great powers of Europe acted for fear of a similar situation arising again. The rest of the 19th century in [Europe](#) remained under the influence of this powerful norm in foreign policy. Bismarck's efforts for a balance of power were strongly motivated by a desire to discourage military expansion and prominence for fear of reprisal. With Germany's consolidation in 1871 (preceded by that of Italy the year before), the old balance of power on the continent was strongly challenged and thus a new rebalancing was seen as urgently needed.

In a similar logic, fear of Hitler's attempts at hegemony pushed for the unlikely alliance between ideological competitors during WWII, which included Western democracies and the Soviet Union. The later part of the 20th century and the 21st century, however, introduced some limitations to the logic of the balance of power. That is not to say that the principle is rendered obsolete by globalization, but it is revamped in other terms. The most powerful actors in the current multipolar system, the US and China, are currently in a [symbiotic relation](#), defined by an unprecedented amount of economic interdependence, while they remain ideologically incompatible and politically in competition for influence and hegemony. These unique circumstances may assuage the fears of direct military confrontation – as they both must regard their relationship with pragmatism (both have to lose in case of military escalations) – but competition and the fear of significant advances and gains by the other strongly determine both countries' domestic and foreign policy.

The second analog, also the subject of a wide literature, is the concept of a [security dilemma](#). Closely tied to balance of power, security dilemmas typically arise when one state perceives the augmentation of power of another state as a security threat. The ensuing dilemma for the first state is to do nothing, thus leaving itself open to potential domination by a superior force, or to militarize—with the likely consequence that the other state will perceive this activity as threatening, thus leading to a cycle of mutual escalation. The least desired but most likely outcome, according to a number of game-theoretical analyses, is a *decrease* in security for both parties as a consequence of heightened threat, whether real or merely perceived. Arms races up to and including so-called [mutually assured destruction](#) can be interpreted as an extension of this concept.

Nuclear deterrence is often lauded for a roughly 75-year track record wherein collective fear has prevented a single combat-use of nuclear weapons. The comfort often taken from this history should be moderated, however, not only in consideration of the number of 'close calls' and 'false alarms' that have plagued our nuclear era, but because lacking any relevant counterfactuals it is incautious to claim that deterrence is really doing the work for which it is credited. As is well known in the field of logic, positive results show only that a hypothesis might be true; the patient getting well after medicine is administered provides inductive evidence but does not rule out lurking variables or complex causality.

The importance of these considerations with respect to policy-making in the international system is significant. Geopolitical realities have shifted since the War of Spanish succession, yet balance of power considerations remain highly relevant, particularly with respect to the regional distribution of nuclear powers.

However, while conflict remains a reality of international politics, the case of the US-China relations mentioned above also serves as a powerful reminder about the limitations of the realist doctrine. Already in 2001, a [defense strategy review](#) in Washington advised the US to make China its number one enemy, and that warning – and sense of enmity – has only grown each year (most recently re-emphasized in [July 2020](#)). Conditions of globalization and interdependence make a military confrontation extremely unlikely as the costs would exceed the gains. A more appropriate framework for the 21st century is what I previously conceptualized as [Symbiotic Realism](#).

This theory of IR builds upon some of the defining elements of Realism but accounts for the shifts in power due to globalization. It has 4 main pillars: 1. *the neurobiological substrate of human nature*, 2. the premise of persistent *anarchy* in the global system, which is simultaneously defined by 3. *global interdependence* and 4. *instant connectivity*. The Realists' pessimism about human nature and global politics –tragically locked in a power-balancing mode and security dilemmas – is assuaged in Symbiotic Realism, not by a simplistic notion that globalization means the eradication of conflict, but by pragmatism in the face of profound mutual interdependences in the global system. This also strongly

obviates the logic of zero-sum games. A more appropriate paradigm today is what I called the [Multi-Sum Security Principle](#), which states that:

In a globalized world, security can no longer be thought of as a zero-sum game involving states alone. Global security, instead, has five dimensions that include human, environmental, national, transnational, and transcultural security, and therefore, global security and the security of any state or culture cannot be achieved without good governance at all levels that guarantees security through justice for all individuals, states and cultures.

Conclusions and the way forward

Fear can swiftly induce responses in the form of pre-emptive aggression. Pre-emptive aggression is a function of a basic wiring in our emotional, amoral and egoistic nature, designed to alert us to danger, protect us from harm and ensure our survival. While this mechanism is ingrained in our neuropsychology, the existence of prolonged fear is a symptom of institutional failure. Simply put, this occurs when governance fails to minimize the sources of fear and insecurity in the community and society. The pseudo-altruistic behavior that may emerge will be based on calculations to maximize chances of survival – a minimal threshold for human existence that hardly supports the pursuit of higher goals.

At the domestic level, governance that integrates human dignity in its holistic sense is critical to sustain durable forms of social cooperation and to ensure true human flourishing. In global politics, where anarchy (in the sense of an absence of a central overarching authority or government) makes enforcement mechanisms weaker, fear-driven reactions can be limited through forms of collaboration that necessarily, in time, make conflict unlikely and undesirable. Symbiotic Realism reconciles this tension between persistent competition and cooperation and interdependence.

Going forward, increased transparency and better communication of intentions between states is critical to international stability. The same logic applies to nascent security dilemmas, not only in their classical form involving reactive military build-up but also through brinkmanship by way of hostile economic policies towards other countries. At the very least, increased interdependence pulls states towards symbiotic realist relations and that offers the underlying guarantees that – even as various forms of competition continue – dangerous escalations are to be avoided as they only incur unaffordable costs for all parties involved.



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