

A Disambiguation of War and Combat

Is war intrinsic to humanity? Many people seek answers to fundamental questions surrounding the nature of humanity's relationship with war. Some of the experts that approach this question do so by investigating the nature of human aggression. The idea is that if we have a predisposition for aggression, that we have a predisposition for combat, and therefore war. There is a potential issue, however: can we assume that war is enough like combat for this logic to work, or does this need to be investigated further? For this question to be analyzed, several component pieces must be investigated. First, 'combat' must be defined. Ideally, 'war' would then be defined as well, but that question is too large to adequately research in this context. Instead, a set of defining criteria will be assembled. The definition of combat will then be analyzed in the context of these criteria.

Despite some variety in opinion about the particular context required for combat, experts generally agree that combat is a type of fighting. As defined by the Cambridge dictionary, combat is "a fight, especially during a war" ('combat', *Cambridge English Dictionary*). Other dictionaries, such as the Merriam-Webster English Dictionary, omit the qualifier about war ('combat', *Merriam-Webster*). Regardless of these slight differences, the fundamental element of combat, that being fighting taking place between opposing forces, is generally agreed upon.

In contrast to the general agreement concerning the definition of combat, there is no such agreement on the definition of war. However, most expert definitions of war do not contradict one another; rather, some definitions are simply more or less inclusive. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, the defining criteria uses elements extracted from various sources. This is done with the understanding that the primary aim is to determine the level of analogy between combat and war, not to come up with a set of criteria that works in all situations all of the time.

The first criterion, which is particularly prominent among legal and military sources, is that war must be intentional. The political scientist R. J. Rummel describes a necessary condition of war as “a *will-to-conflict*” and notes that no conflict (and no war) can occur if the involved parties are not willing to go to war (Rummel). Therefore, based on this criterion, all parties involved in a conflict must intend for it to be a conflict for the conflict to be war. Wars do not occur accidentally. Note, however, that this does not disbar one party from being the aggressor; this criterion merely requires that all involved parties intend to be at war. It does not require both parties to *want* to be at war.

The second criterion is that war must be widespread. Carl von Clausewitz defines war as “a duel on an extensive scale,” (Clausewitz 75). Nick Bosio states that violence in war “is always physical and extends beyond the nation-state.” (Bosio). Although neither of these sources state it directly, both imply that the reach of the violence inflicted by war matters, as well as the scale. Similarly, Ashworth states that war is “a type of armed conflict between large nation-States”, meaning that war cannot be a proportionally small affair (Ashworth 2). If a conflict is small, contained, and causes no effect to the civilian population, then it is not war.

The third criterion is that, for a conflict to be a war, violence must be the primary means of interaction. According to the Australian Army Land Warfare Doctrine 1, war requires that “Opponents seek to impose their will on one another through violence.” (LWD1 10). War is not just an intentional, widespread conflict; it is a conflict where the method of contest is violence. Similar to this statement, Clausewitz defines war as “an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfill our will,” (Clausewitz 90). Wars are, therefore, never non-violent conflicts. This agrees with Bosio’s definition as well, which requires that the “‘other means’ [of competition] are primarily violent.” (Bosio). More exclusively, this also means that wars are not

merely conflicts in which violence is used—wars are conflicts in which violence is used more than any other method of coercion.

The final criterion is that war must carry risk. War requires consequences for the losing party. While most sources do not state this directly, many sources outline benefits of winning wars and contrasting consequences for losing them. War has stakes. As B. Russell writes, “War is a conflict between two groups...in order to achieve some object which it desires.” (Russell 79). Bernard writes similarly that wars are fought “for the pursuit of some fairly well-defined public or quasipublic objective.” (Bernard). If each group involved in a war is attempting to acquire something by winning, then it follows that if the war is lost, the objective will not be acquired. As for consequences of losing wars, typically only the members of losing nations are tried for war crimes (BBC, “War Crimes”). Additionally, defeated nations may experience a “fundamental challenge to the self-image and confidence of the state.” (Barnhart). This is a negative result of loss; nations that lose the confidence of their populace are in grave danger of ceasing to exist as a state. Winning a war does not guarantee the victor success in other matters and losing a war does not guarantee the loser all possible negative consequences. However, all wars have at least some consequences. War presents participating groups with both the risk of failing to achieve desirable objectives and exposure to additional consequences.

Evaluated in the context of these criteria, there are some criteria that combat will not necessarily meet. For instance, the definition of combat makes no requirement for intent, whereas the criteria assembled for war does. And although combat may certainly be widespread, it is not required for a situation to be ‘combat’. Combat does, however, meet the criteria for violent interaction. Almost more important than all of the following criteria put together, however, is the fact that combat absolutely does not require risk in the same way that war does. It

is possible to disengage from combat—the concept of a strategic retreat exists as proof. By contrast, there is no retreat from war. There is either victory or defeat. War, unlike combat, does not allow for disengagement without loss.

As previously mentioned, there is contentious debate over the existence of a human ‘war instinct’. Some scientists believe that there is such an instinct. For instance, Dale Peterson and Richard Wrangham’s research with chimpanzees leads them to conclude that believing that “humans might have been favored by natural selection to hate and to kill their enemies has become entirely, if tragically, reasonable.” (Wrangham and Peterson). Some researchers, like David Carrier, have even gone so far as to suggest that human physical features are uniquely evolved for violence, and therefore warfare (Gabbatiss). Other experts, like Philip Starks, believe that “war stems from a biological trait—and biological traits, as we know, can be overcome...But with human warfare, both evolution and culture play a role.” (Starks) This view, while more nuanced, is also quite pessimistic.

Other experts disagree with these conclusions. In *The Seville Statement on Violence*, twenty scientists stated the following:

It is scientifically incorrect to say that war is caused by "instinct" or any single motivation. The emergence of modern warfare has been a journey from the primacy of emotional and motivational factors, sometimes called "instincts," to the primacy of cognitive factors... We conclude that biology does not condemn humanity to war, and that humanity can be freed from the bondage of biological pessimism and empowered with confidence to undertake the transformative tasks needed in this International Year of

Peace and in the years to come...The same species who invented war is capable of inventing peace. The responsibility lies with each of us. (Adams et al. 1167-1168)

While these questions have yet to be answered, the mere existence of the debate means that the question 'Is humanity predisposed to war?' deserves careful and thorough consideration. David P Barash describes what is wrong with evaluating this question without nuance:

I fear that many of my colleagues have failed, as previously have I, to distinguish between the relatively straightforward evolutionary roots of human violence and the more complex, multifaceted and politically fraught question of human war. To be blunt, violence is almost certainly deeply entrenched in human nature; warfare, not so much.

(Barash)

War is a complex issue, and identifying its origins is likely to be more complex than identifying the origins of violence.

Based on the research conducted, combat is defined as a kind of fighting, with perhaps some situational requirements. The defining criteria for war require that war is a) intentional, b) widespread, c) violent, and d) carries risk. Combat does not match these criteria by necessity. While it is possible for some combat situations to meet the criteria for war, meeting these criteria is not a function of combat. Therefore, combat and aggression are not analogues for war. Expert opinions also suggest that investigations into the roots of war would be well served by the introduction of more nuance. War is a topic that humanity has a vested interest in; it deserves more consideration than being reduced to one of its constituent parts.

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