



THE ONLY CAUSE OF WAR

Mortimer Adler

Part 1 of 2

The only cause of war is anarchy. Anarchy occurs wherever men or nations try to live together without each surrendering their sovereignty.

If a man or a nation could live entirely by itself, exercising no influence upon another nor suffering external influences, the word “sovereign” would not apply. Nor would “anarchy.” Anarchy is the condition of those who try to live together without government. Only those who do not recognize any government over them regard themselves as sovereign.

Anarchy and sovereignty are inseparable. As we have seen, they both involve a social relationship), a relationship of reciprocal influence among free agents. But we should observe at once that the notions of anarchy and sovereignty are incompatible with the notions of society. A society or community cannot normally exist without government.

The words “an anarchic community” or “a society of sovereigns” may not be as self-contradictory as “round square,” but certainly the word “society” or “community” changes its meaning radically when it occurs in these phrases. Unless we detect this shift in meaning, we will be deceived by a dangerous and insidious counterfeit. We will talk about a “society of nations” as if it were a political community in the *same sense* as a community of men.

One other point should be noted. Nowhere in the civilized world can we find an anarchic community of *men*, a society of sovereign *men*. A few experiments in anarchy have been tried, but their utter and speedy failure has verified the truth the experimenters should have known—that individual human beings cannot form a society without government, or live together without submitting themselves to the authority and power of the community.

This does not mean that the notions of anarchy and sovereignty lack practical significance or have no application to reality. On the contrary, throughout the whole of history and everywhere in the world today, the “social” relationship of states or nations exhibits the twin features of anarchy and sovereignty.

The astounding fact is that states or nations seem able to endure a condition under which individual men cannot survive. But the fact becomes less astounding when we remember the price the world has paid—war, continuous war, war without interruption, without any change except for the alterations between war by the diplomats and war by the generals. The price of sovereignty is war.

Individual men cannot live without living together, and they cannot live together in a state of war, actual or potential. States or nations, because each is much more self-sufficing than any individual man, can manage to live—even for fairly long periods without living together in *peace*. But they are never so self-sufficient that they can manage to live without living together *at war*.

“Living together at war!” That strange and wonderful phrase tells the whole story of the tensions and frustrations which anarchy and sovereignty have bestowed upon man’s corporate life. It also reveals anarchy—and with it sovereignty—to be the only cause of war among those who must try to live together.

The literature of the subject abounds with a large assortment of factors and forces called “the causes of war.” Classifying the causes of war has been a favorite field for the professors of “international relations.” Determining which were the predisposing and which the exciting causes of a particular war has occupied the attention of historians, and also the students of “international law,” who, in addition, try to allocate guilt and innocence by applying the criteria of just war and unjust war.

Many books devoted to these problems were written about the war which began in 1914. Many books of the same sort will undoubtedly be written about the war which began in 1939. Some have already begun to appear.

But one fact, which the professors themselves readily admit, changes the significance of everything they say. They admit that the war which began in 1939 represents a continuation of the war which ended in 1918. They sometimes even explicitly call the intervening period a “truce,” during which the war was being carried on by other means.

This should lead them to see that the causes they talk about are *always* operative—just as much during the period of truce as during the years when the hostility and conflict between nations expresses itself on the battlefield rather than in the chancelleries and foreign offices, through force of arms rather than through the guile of disarmament conferences. They should have learned from Machiavelli that the same end can be achieved by the cunning of the fox as by the lion’s might.

The obvious point becomes obscured by the deceptive use of the word “peace” instead of “truce” to designate the period when the generals are waiting for the diplomats to fail. That makes it *seem* as if the so-called “causes of war” were inoperative or held in abeyance. But when we understand the truth that all the machinations of diplomacy, all the trickery of international relations, signify the operation of the identical causes, we see that the only difference between a shooting war and a “war of nerves” lies in the channels through which these causes operate.

A deeper truth remains to be seen. None of the factors cited produces war, either actual warfare or the potential state of war which

always exists among sovereign states. A true analogue of every one of these factors will be found at work in the affairs of individual men living together in a single community. Yet, despite this fact, the members of a political community live at peace with one another.

Each of the following elements is *supposed* to operate as a cause of war between nations, yet each occurs in the life of a single society.

1. ECONOMIC RIVALRY

Competition, even cutthroat competition, exists among the corporations and the individuals of most modern societies.

2. CULTURAL ANTIPATHIES

These create friction among the members of a community. The clash of nationalities or races is present in the communities which have assimilated men from different historic backgrounds and of different biological stocks.

Such conflict may be aggravated by the arrogance of majority groups and by the aggressiveness of the numerically inferior minorities.

3. RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES

The rift of deep religious differences has been present in historic communities. In modern times, a single society has embraced infidels and believers, atheists and God-fearing men, every mode of life which men of other persuasions call “paganism” or “heresy.”

4. INDIVIDUAL ACTS OF INJUSTICE

No society is ever free from the injuries which men do to men. When men live together, some will always injure others or take advantage of others, just as there will always be fundamental disagreements and disputes.

Individual differences in talent and power always tend toward inequitable distributions of privilege, and privileged classes always tend to perpetuate themselves. Even in a community having the most just political constitution, there will be class distinctions.

The so-called “class war”—the conflict between the *haves* and the *have-nots*—has always been present regardless of the particular form it takes, whether the *haves* have blueblood or tainted gold or unmerited gifts of mind and energy.

5. HATE AND FEAR

All the emotions supposed to underlie the antagonism of nations will be found motivating the actions of individuals in a single community. Men hate and fear some of their neighbors, distrust them, wish them ill, for a wide variety of reasons or rationalizations.

6. FACTIONS AND IDEOLOGIES

Within any political society, and due to some combination of the causes already mentioned, men ally themselves into opposing groups, form political parties, foment factionalism of all sorts, and adopt the slogans and shibboleths of conflicting ideologies.

If the unity which is the heart of a community had to be dead uniformity or complete unanimity, no political society would or could ever exist.

Everyone knows these facts about the society in which he lives. He does not have to be a psychologist or a social scientist, an economist or a political philosopher, to know that all these factors and forces activate the daily life of any community. He need only be wise enough to acknowledge that men are not angels. and that no earthly society ever has been or ever will be like the community of saints in heaven—or, for that matter, like the association of the damned in hell.

On earth saints and sinners must live together, and there is a little of both in every man. How this can be managed successfully is *the* political problem. It is the problem of war and peace.

The foregoing enumeration is neither an exhaustive nor a subtle classification of the factors usually called “causes of war.” But it is sufficient to make the point that everything which has ever been regarded as a cause of war operates within a single community *without causing war*.

None of these things is by itself or in itself a cause of war. Nor is war caused by a combination of all of them. Singly or together these factors and forces cause war *only when* their action is not restrained by the institutions and machinery of government. The *presence* of governmental controls prevents these factors from causing war within a single community. Hence we see that it is the *absence* of governmental controls which permits these things to cause war between communities.

To say that anarchy is the *only* cause of war is, therefore, to say that it is the *sine qua non* condition, the one indispensable factor without which every other we can think of would be an insufficient cause.

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Anarchy—the *absence* of government—is a negative factor. The various forces or tendencies which lead to war, *unless restrained by government*, are positive factors.

How, then, can it be said that anarchy is the cause of war? Must we not admit that the negative factor would not cause war between nations *unless* some or all of the positive causes of dissension and conflict also operated?

The question is fair. It can be answered by distinguishing between causes we can control and those we cannot. Only the former are significant for practical purposes.

There are some disease processes which result from a combination of positive and negative factors. The positive factor is the presence of certain bacterial agents. The negative factor is malnutrition, that is, a lack of certain vitamins in the diet. Neither the germ nor the vitamin deficiency is by itself sufficient to produce the disease. Only their concomitance will produce it.

If the bacterial agents are always present, and if there is absolutely no way of freeing the organism from such parasites, then the only controllable element in the situation becomes the negative factor—the vitamin deficiency.

When we have enough knowledge about vitamins to know which ones counteract the parasites in question, and when we know how to regulate the diet to ensure the presence of these vitamins, we can prevent the disease.

From the therapeutic point of view, there is much point in saying that a certain vitamin deficiency is the only cause of the disease. *It is the only cause we can control.* For all practical purposes, we can neglect the causes beyond our control.

We shall never be able to eradicate all the positive causes of war. From experience in our own community, we also know that these positive causes can be effectively counteracted by government. Total lack of government, or grave deficiency in its operation, then

becomes, not only the negative cause of war, but also the only cause we can control. For all practical purposes, it is the only cause worth bothering about.

Our present situation is like the medical situation in which physicians know the precise vitamins that must be added to the diet, but do not yet know how to introduce these vitamins into the normal diet in sufficient quantity to prevent the disease.

We know *now* that only world government can *prevent* international wars. We know now the minimum *amount* of government which is needed, less than which could not effectively check the ever-present causes of war. But we do not *now* know how to inject the requisite quantity of government into world affairs or how to overcome the existing obstacles to such therapeutic procedure.

In so far as our concern with causes is practical, not academic or theoretical, there are only two things worth bothering about. *One is the single negative factor which permits the positive causes to operate. We know that we can prevent war by abolishing international anarchy. The other consists in all the obstacles which at present stand in the way of our abolishing anarchy.*

When enough people come to understand that anarchy is the *only controllable cause* of war, when they are no longer misled or deceived by irrelevant discussion about all the uncontrollable causes, then the chances increase of our being able to cause world peace by world government. Much else will remain to be done. But an understanding of causes which directs practical men to the only real remedy must be the first step in successful therapy. Everything men have done about war for centuries has been on the level of administering aspirin. Even if no aspirin had been given, the fever would probably have fluctuated up and down periodically in the intermittent phases of fighting and truce.

We have played around with all the superficial aspects of the human environment, neglecting the political neurosis which, from time to time, turns into the raving insanity of actual warfare. During the comparatively lucid intervals of potential war, we neglect the neurosis—the schizoid tendency in a world of sovereign states.

The psychologist will tell us that the only cure for the split personality involved in all neuroses is to get the parts of the soul to act together under some rule of order. The cure for international anarchy is the same.

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