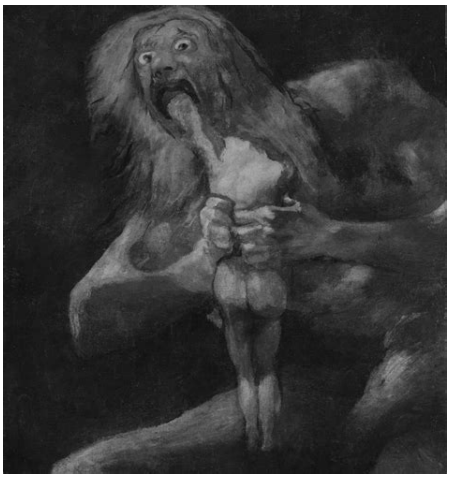
Putin, Power and the Human Conundrum

Why do humans wish to dominate or eliminate one another?

David Zigmond



Human cruelties and oppressions are often the major – certainly the most emotive – items of our newsfare. Our moral outrage and anxieties are more easily expressed. Harder to achieve are our deeper understandings: can we expand these?

March 2022. Vladimir Putin's shocking Russian springtime invasion of the Ukraine has certainly, for so many, upset our sense of probabilities. Even in the political world of known reckless chancers and power-hungry gamblers it has been a startling lurch into incomprehensible hazard.

What motivates such globally-scaled, centre-staged aggrandisement, this quasi-religious sense of nationalist entitlement and supreme destiny? In the months preceding the rape-like invasion of the Ukraine there were two similar, if very different, shocks. First, the fall of the faltering, fledgling Afghanistan democracy to the Taliban. Then the abduction, rape and murder of a young woman by a serving Metropolitan Police Officer, Wayne Cozens.

What is the common theme here? Are these merely egregious and contemporary examples of a timeless human appetite – compulsion even – for the subjection, surrender, eventually the extermination of others? And, if so, how do we understand such persistent, dark undertows to our humanity?

Some will quickly designate or categorise such behaviour: narcissm, sadism, psychopathy are all such verbal devices that may slickly ascribe and circumscribe the ugly human stains that leach through our humanity. Yet they do little to explain them: a category is not an explanation.

There are more substantial attempts at explanation. From psychoanalytic psychology we have Freud's mooted idea of a 'death instinct' – a particularly human strategy to shut off our endless cravings, ravings and conflicts by instead inducing our own and omni-destruction; Melanie Klein instead suggested a universal raging infantile envy

of the goodness of the breast – the 'other', out there – an often-hidden hatred of all that we are not, cannot have or command. From evolutionary psychology we have extrapolations of social Darwinism: all plants and animals must compete to feed and breed, and in doing so must suppress – even eliminate – any current or potential competition. So from this evolutionary perspective both the Taliban and Putin are merely doing what successful plants and animals do – assuring their individual and species' (clan's) advantage and survival. Such social Darwinism is just *realpolitik*, stark naked.

Such explanations from evolutionary psychology differ from psychoanalytic explanations in this way: however unpalatable, they at least have the merit of having links with an observable world of animal behaviour. But such ethology can only take us so far because there are also great differences in the competitive struggles of humans and the struggles of other animals. Yes, both will fight for greater success in feeding and in breeding, but in higher mammals, for example, the battle for dominance is almost always limited to what is necessary only to get the competitor to either flee or signal submission. So mortal combat or destruction of habitat is rare in other creatures, often epidemic in humans. In our kindred species, therefore, we can see that aggression and violence efficiently serve the survival and welfare of the individual, their genetic line, and maybe the species. This functionality is *teleological*: it simply serves biological purpose. It goes no further.

Yet such teleology does not account for the greater part, and the most destructive kind, of human dominance and acts of violence. Laying waste to a country, scorched earth, shattered conurbations, starvation and munitions-murdered populations do not effectively serve the breeding and feeding of the massive invading Russian

forces, or the Kalashnikov-toting Taliban. Animals, by contrast, do not drive themselves to such large-scale folly because their needs remain limited and functional. To enter this human spectrum of human mayhem requires a quantum leap from teleology to ideology: animals are driven by what is actual, what is *there*; humans are galvanised more by what they think *should* be there – a 'promised land', reprising an ancient dispute, a legacy of heroism, an immortal and favoured place with a God… All those require a kind of human imagination and complex (excessive) intelligence other creatures are spared.

Similar considerations seem to fit Wayne Cozens and what we can deduce of sexual murderers and serial killers. Such crimes haunt us partly because their motivation seems so obscure: they bring no gains to breeding, feeding, social status or shared sensual pleasure. What can the gratification be?

Such dark shadows of our humanity are neither new nor rare: they are there in our earliest recorded myths and history, we witness them now in newsprint and on our screens enacted by furtive lone individuals or publicly flaunted militias and armies. In response we may now brandish psychiatric nosology, psychoanalytic and evolutionary psychology aplenty, but these do not help much in understanding our shadows.

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The following is another kind of offering: a concoction, an amalgam of evolutionary and existential psychologies – this may take us rather further.

We start with an ancient mystery and anomaly: why did evolution so massively enlarge the size of the human brain? In other species the size of the brain is easily understood and limited in terms of its functional requirements – to secure or gain advantage in breeding and feeding, and to ensure shelter, defensive space and group membership. These are all teleological.

The evolution of humans dislodged such reciprocal and stable teleology: we had now a rapid and massive step-change into an unprecedented realm of cerebral excess. The brain became much larger than can be explained by the functional requirements for individual or group survival. Why this excess emerged is unclear to biological science, leaving biblical myth to humbly or extravagantly attempt to explain.

Man is the only animal for whom his own existence is a problem he has to solve

Erich Fromm (1900-1980)

So what have the consequences been?

Well, our surplus brain capacity has led to a far-more-than-necessary tendency to both memory (storing and recycling the past) and imagination (what a far-future or other reality might be). This poses problems because such profligate cerebral activity often distracts or displaces our contact with current reality – the here and now – (which other creatures seem to inhabit almost entirely) with something quite different: our imaginings, our reworkings, our fictionalising. All too readily our attention and investment shifts from what is *there* to what is *not*. Hence humans' unrivalled ability to invent, to create art, to newly empower and yet – inversely – to

be tormented by what is not there: our anxiety (what might be), our depression (what was, or ought to be), our psychosis (what is, yet is not) … and then our obsessions and hatreds offering spurious relief from these.

Humans' gigantic brain power, together with our technological inventions, has given us a kind of burdened knowledge – we are confronted by the illimitable time and space far beyond our own perception, memory or influence. So our brain's power, paradoxically, can show us – undeniably – how much greater the vast 'other' is, and how transient and mortal we ourselves are. The exceptional power of humans' brains thus shows us how powerless, in fact, we are. All other creatures seem insentient and unhaunted by such responsibility-demanding knowledge.

And haunted by these responsibilities we humans undoubtedly are. In myriad ways we can see how our restless and troubled species must struggle with what we can call our Four Basic Existential Anxieties. In brief these are:

1. *Mortality*. Maybe some higher primates and elephants have some self-sentience of death but, if so, this is faint compared with the sharp and intense knowledge we humans struggle with, of our inexorable and universal endings: we all come to know we are going to die. Such knowledge is a universal and haunting spectre, though made more bearable if we find buttresses and counters to our other three anxieties (aloneness, insignificance and meaninglessness). Religion, in its more primitive mythology (eg reincarnation, heaven), can attempt denial; in its more sophisticated forms religion consoles with transpersonal, transcendental philosophy.

2. *Aloneness*. The complexity and uniqueness of each individual's consciousness and experience can easily lead to a frightening and painful loneliness, sometimes intolerable. We counter this throughout our lives by building, seeking and protecting connections, bridges and identifications with others.

3. *Insignificance*. All our recorded history, photography, communications and space technology show us how small and insignificant we are in the greater schemes of the aeons of time and the infinity (?) of space. Only by making ourselves significant to others – and enabling their significance for us – can we ameliorate such crushing humbling.

4. *Meaninglessness*. It is doubtful if any non-human creature is troubled by the deeper meaning of things beyond the evidently functional or pleasurable. But for humans the questions of deeper and wider meaning are recurrently and painfully insistent. If we ourselves cannot create or find meaning, and we cannot find escape through distraction, then others may inflict their meaning on us.

How do we embrace, avoid, encounter, deny or project these anxieties? The answer will determine much of how each of us live our lives – as individuals, in families, larger groups, and the States that aggregate us. Our positive responses to these lead to our bonds of love, friendship, generosity, empathic kindness and any spirit of welfare. Less personally, our positive responses render our creative arts, sciences and philosophy.

But – a crucial but – 'Nature abhors a vacuum', and this is particularly true here of

humans. If we cannot find positive responses to our existential anxieties then those absences create a vacuum. And that vacuum will suck in, will provoke, other available responses that are rather less positive.

So it is that we often defend less realistically against our ever-present vulnerabilities: we avoid or displace them. We try to disprove them by demonstrating (ultimately, vainly) the *opposite* – by our conspicuous consumption, our puffed-up personas, our concealments of ageing, a ruthlessness of ambition, the jealously guarded acquisition of profligate wealth, the fearless warrior … All are attempts to push away our fears.

Then there are the attempts to eclipse our hauntings, to obscure or flood them out. Our many addictions show us how common are our fears: chemicals and alcohol, sex, obsessive attachments, online 'relationships', gambling, workaholism – so many of our quotidian activities can be marshalled to armour-plate us against our deep dreads.

Then, when our armoury and defences fail, we contend not just with mental dis-ease, but mental illness. We collapse under our 'not-theres', buckle beneath our excesses of memory and imagination.

We can resort to more primitive, more desperate, defences that are yet more dangerous than those others. And then, to avoid our own vulnerabilities, we project our terrors into others: 'It is *you*, not *I*, who will be alone, insignificant, leading a senseless life that is all-too-mortal.' Such armour is like cannibalism – devouring others to (impossibly) gain supernatural, superhuman power for one's own inviolability. This is the major root of sadism, of the will to (non-teleological) power.

These are coercive relationships, murderously prescriptive religions, the crowd-delirium of contagious violence, tyrannical regulation guaranteeing hegemony, the inseminating rape of the other, the elimination of life. Behind all these the puppeteer enjoys (for a while) a seeming immunity from our common transience, insignificance and loneliness. For a while that particular human can feel Olympian, God-like.

Hitler's formidable quest to be a God-head yielded but a dozen years of the vaunted Thousand Year Reich. A few years later a nemesis of that Reich, President General De Gaulle, reflected 'L'état, c'est moi', only to die, power-relinquished, within the decade. And now, well into the next century, we have President Putin invading Ukraine, invoking a restored Greater Russia as a kind of metaphysical holy grail, a necessary duty for a greater good, a quasi-religious nationalism of which he is the Supreme Leader.

In earlier years Putin courted (and gained) popularity and power with images posing as a rather diminutive-yet-inflated Superman: bare-chested, horse-backed, muscle-flexed, ice-skating, rifle-toting.

Now, in 2022, an older Putin is shown on screens worldwide: he is now globally renowned and crucial. He is grey-suited, seemingly office-bound and security-isolated from all but the corruptly collusive and the fearfully compliant. He would probably never acknowledge, even less talk about, his own existential anxieties – the common predicaments we must share for being human.

Instead he chooses to invade and destroy, claiming not choice but righteous imperative.

This is the price we pay for such denial, and then its projection.

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David Zigmond is the author of *Humanity's Conundrum: Why do we suffer? And how do we heal?* (Filament Publications, London)

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