What can our ancestors teach us about trust-building?

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The answer is an extraordinary amount based on what I heard at a fascinating workshop held on 25 May in the delightful surroundings of the Château de Bossey, a short coach ride from Geneva. The meeting on 'Human Security, Human Nature, and Trust-Building in Negotiations' was organised by the 'Disarmament as Humanitarian Action, Making Multilateral Negotiations Work' (DHA) project of the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) and the Geneva Forum, as part of a collaboration called the Disarmament Insight initiative www.disarmamentinsight.blogspot.com. Their workshop brought together disarmament diplomats from Missions in Geneva, officials from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and UN with considerable experience of disarmament negotiations, and researchers specialising in trust issues.

By way of background, the workshop, along with the Disarmament Insight initiative's other activities, stemmed from the desire of the Geneva Forum and the DHA project to engage with multilateral disarmament practitioners about the findings of the latter's work, which has explored two interconnected themes: first, showing how humanitarian perspectives add value to disarmament and arms control work and proposing new ways these approaches could assist multilateral processes, and second, examining multilateral negotiating processes more broadly to help practitioners "think outside the box" in their work by drawing on interdisciplinary research, including from the natural and behavioural sciences (see John Borrie's 'Human nature, human security and trust-building in negotiation' post of 13 June).

The governments of Norway and the Netherlands fund the DHA project's work, which has generated three important volumes of collaborative research, including some fascinating contributions by practicing diplomats in Geneva (see, for instance, Prins in Borrie & Martin Randin: 2006). The challenge posed for multilateral practitioners in the international security field attending the workshop was to think about how the information presented to them relates to

their interactions, and to what extent their current community of practice leverages or impedes trust-building, something which John Borrie, leader of the DHA project at UNIDIR, described at the meeting as 'cognitive ergonomics'. Several speakers were invited to address the seminar, including Robin Coupland, the ICRC's adviser on armed violence and the effects of weapons and a former war surgeon. The starting point for his presentation was that negotiating effectively on human security issues requires understanding the role our 'nature' plays in the use of weapons and in restraining their use. His brief talk set the scene for the workshop's two main speakers, Frans de Waal and Paul Seabright. Based on a lifetime of studying the dynamics of cooperation and conflict between different types of primates, Frans de Waal, Director, Living Links Centre and C.H. Candler Professor of Primate Behaviour, Department of Psychology, Emory University, examined what can be learned from such an investigation for understanding cooperation and reconciliation between humans. Paul Seabright, Professor of Economics at the Université of Toulouse and author of the best selling The Company of Strangers, developed themes from his 2004 book, including examining falling rates of violent death since prehistoric times and what insights from the neurosciences and behavioural economics could tell us about the human propensity for cooperation.

On the building of trust at the international level, an issue which he had been quite pessimistic about in his book, Seabright's thinking reflected the dominant view in the discipline of International Relations (IR) which has been, in the words of John Mearsheimer, that 'there is little room for trust among states' (Mearsheimer 2001: 32). What underlies this view is that because we can never have one hundred per cent certainty about the current – and crucially the future – motives and intentions of others, we must assume the worst and plan accordingly. State leaders have to begin with the assumption of mistrust because to trust can be dangerous in an uncertain world. But it can be equally dangerous to mistake potential friends for enemies. The security dilemma that confronts governments is to decide whether they face what one participant called a 'trust game' or a 'force game' (see my 'Putting ourselves in the shoes of our enemies' post of 18 May). A category error in thinking about trust is to associate it with the elimination of uncertainty, because if we had certainty, we would not need trust. Other disciplines, notably Psychology, Sociology, and Philosophy have recognised that trust and uncertainty are mutually

implicated, but these ideas have not been systematically applied to IR. Ken Booth and I map out
the beginnings of such an engagement in our forthcoming book The Security Dilemma: Fear,
Cooperation and Trust in World Politics, arguing that although uncertainty will always exist in
world politics, this need not preclude processes of cooperation and trust-building. The challenge
is to explore in greater depth what other disciplines might contribute to thinking about trust at the
international level, and this is why DHA and the Geneva Forum's project, which brought together
de Waal, Seabright and other experts with practicing diplomats was such an important event.
Multilateral arms control negotiations are often the stage for what John Spanier and Joseph
Nogee once called 'Gamesmanship', but what was encouraging from the off-the-record
comments at the workshop by the diplomats was how open they were to new ideas and
approaches in thinking about how to move forward the glacially slow process of disarmament.

A key theme running through the discussions in Geneva concerned how actors who were
committed to promoting cooperation and trust might signal their peaceful intentions. The
immediate response from hard-nosed realists is that it is not possible for states to 'signal type' to
use the language of US theorists writing about the security dilemma (Glaser 1992, 1997; Kydd
1997a+b, 2000, 2005; Mitzen 2006) because of the impossibility of distinguishing offensive from
defensive weapons (see Er-win Tan's 'Missile Defence in Europe' post of 6 June). Even if
decision-makers are persuaded that certain military moves will send a decisive signal of their
peaceful intentions, thereby triggering a virtuous circle of cooperation if others are committed to
the 'trust game', they might be so fearful that such a reassuring move will expose them to great
danger if it is not reciprocated, that they are not prepared to take such risks for trust (Kydd 2000,
2005; Montgomery 2006). Seabright recognised in his presentation that this dilemma had been
faced by the earliest human groups as they had reached out to cooperate with others. We have no
idea how many of our ancestors perished because they mistook an enemy for a friend, and
Seabright rightly praised those who took such risks as the unsung heroes of humanity. Without
these early risky experiments in cooperation and trust, humans would never have evolved the
combination of 'calculation' and 'reciprocity' which, Seabright argued, has made us so good at
detecting cheats and spotting co-operators. Here, the human capacity for smiling, and especially
laughter, has been essential in enabling humans to signal their type. But the grand enterprise of

trust between strangers that has developed from this, and without which the wheels of human sociability would not turn, has been far more impressive within societies than it has been between them. If new structures of trust are to be built at the international level, then peaceful/defensive states will have to do better at signalling their intentions. Here, we might ask what the equivalent of 'laughter' is for diplomats negotiating, for example, to denuclearise the Korean Peninsula or resolve the uncertainties, fears, and mistrust surrounding Iran's nuclear programme. And will decision-makers play the 'trust game' if the consequences of misplaced trust might be a permanent exit from the game itself?

It is not only our earliest human ancestors who might have something to teach us about the importance of taking risks for trust. In his presentation, de Waal explained that chimpanzees are far better at reconciling than humans, though they also seem to have a greater propensity to fight. What is fascinating here is that a male chimpanzee signals his desire to reconcile with another male by placing himself in a position where if the other chimpanzee rejected his olive branch, he would be vulnerable to attack – a perfect illustration of primates 'signalling type'. Decision-makers are more likely to take risks for trust where there is what Booth and I call a margin of safety, but primates appear to reconcile without such a safety net being in place. Given that there may be situations where it is only possible for a state to signal its peaceful intentions to its adversary by exposing itself to significant risks in the event that its trust proved unwarranted, the challenge facing leaders in these cases is whether to take a 'leap in the dark' (the phrase comes from Robert Schuman, French Foreign Minister, when launching his bold plan for European integration in 1950). 'Leaps in the dark' (the concept is developed in Booth and Wheeler 2007) clearly involve risks and dangers. But in weighing these up, decision-makers need to remember that so-called 'playing it safe' – applying worst-case thinking because there are no guarantees about the current and future motives and intentions of others – brings with it the risks and dangers of a self-fulfilling prophecy of security competition which no one intended. There is no escape from risk and uncertainty in our world, and whilst this is so, a concept like trust will remain both elusive in conception - and hence worthy of interdisciplinary study - and indispensable to our global future.

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There is also a podcast of de Waal's presentation available through the Disarmament Insight blog.
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Geneva Forum www.geneva-forum.org

ICRC http://www.icrc.org/

More on the work of the DDMI in the area of Trust-Building is available on the Institute's
website: http://www.aber.ac.uk/interpol/research/DDMI/ResearchTrust-building.html

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