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the road

## THE ORIGINS AND CAUSES OF AGGRESSION ON THE ROAD

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It is hard to find an origin of aggression on the road, although there is strong evidence that it has existed for at least a millennium.

Pope Boniface VIII in 1300 laid down which side pilgrims going to Rome should pass on - sword arm to sword arm (keep left). Presumably he did this because there were arguments. It has also been suggested that only rich people carried swords and they rode their horses on the left while the ordinary poor walked to the right. If one believes that walking on the left became a way of illustrating dominance (an argument that can be borne out by revolutionary, egalitarian France being so keen on keeping right and imposing this rule wherever they went) one can argue that one of the traits behind today's aggressive road use dates back into medieval and renaissance times.

Certainly as time goes by and documentation improves, examples of aggression become clearer. In 1817 the English poet Lord Byron owned up to "boxing the ear" of a man in a carriage who was impudent to his horse. Presumably that was the 19<sup>th</sup> century equivalent of the offensive gesture. It could reflect on his status (and thus dominance) that the police chose to take no action against Lord Byron when the "boxing" was reported.

By 1861 the situation in Britain was obviously bad enough that the "Offences Against the Person Act" included the offences of "wanton and furious driving" – defined as "*Whosoever, having charge of any carriage or vehicle, shall by wanton or furious driving or racing, or other wilful misconduct, or by wilful neglect, do or cause to be done any bodily harm to any person whatsoever shall be guilty of a misdemeanour ... liable to two years imprisonment with or without hard labour.*" "Wanton and furious cycling" was also included in the Act.

It is remarkable that such an anachronistic turn of phrase still exists in English law – indeed in December 2003 a man was convicted of the offence – and given a suspended prison sentence. But his had nothing to do with aggression – it was a way of acting against someone injuring another while driving on private land and therefore outside the scope of road traffic law.

But even more remarkable is that this law was passed 34 years before the first vehicle powered by the internal combustion engine arrived in the UK. There must have been many other “Lord Byrons” about. But certainly there was bad and aggressive driving in the days of horses and carts, road steam engines and cycles. And the 1500 recorded road deaths of 1873, among a population of 23 million, gave a death rate per head of population for England higher than in 2002.

This makes it hard to argue that aggressive driving is a new phenomenon, even though most people would say that it is much more prevalent than in days gone by. There are two likely reasons for this - it could be a result of congestion or of a more aggressive society. But both these explanations can also be looked at in terms of whether the aggression is hostile - a spontaneous explosion caused in an individual toward another individual by the pressure of circumstances - or whether it is an instrumental aggression used to gain time, advantage or dominance in a situation.

### **Congestion**

Congestion makes people angry, just like any other delay. Most people have stood and seethed in a slow moving queue in a supermarket, at the ticket office at a railway station or while waiting for a nonexistent bus. The fact that they outwardly keep in control in these situations is perhaps more down to the fact that they fear being recognised, or standing out in the crowd, more than anything else.

But within the anonymity offered by cars, more and more people have to live with two types of congestion. There is both the unexpected breakdown of traffic flow and the wholly predictable queuing of the regular commute. The frustration of the former and the desire to avoid the latter can both cause the flare-up and a short loss of self control. And it is in this area that too much of the public attention placed on driver aggression has been placed.

But at the same time it has to be accepted that more aggressive driving can benefit the perpetrator in both situations. This aggression is not a not flare up, it is calculated. Drivers who not take their place in the correct queue but charge down the lane reserved for turning traffic until the last minute when they force their way into the queue forty plus cars nearer the front, annoying 40 plus people, plan this aggression because they gain.

### **Society**

Society has changed. Aggression seems more widespread. Many countries are experiencing rises in violent crime, and there may be a correlation between crimes of violence and road deaths – a useful proxy for bad driving. An AA study suggested that there was a correlation of 0.7 between areas of the UK with a high murder rate and a high road death rate. So this drift to violence may be playing its role.

But “instrumental aggression” – calculated aggression for personal gain - is also more widespread. In many areas of life the days when you took your turn (for a promotion at work, perhaps), didn't try to get a better price than that offered, or accepted bad service without a complaint, have ended. People are expected to take calculated risks to get ahead. Yet on the roads we still expect people to take their turn, to not take risks, and to work for the good of everyone.

Aggression on the road may be to many just a way of getting ahead that would be deemed acceptable in nearly any other part of life. Many of today's road users have got where they are in life by ignoring or bending rules they see as irrelevant, by taking risks, and by being competitive. In short, we may now live in a world where instrumental aggression in traffic can reward the aggressor. However we would also argue that this should not be the case on the roads.

It is unlikely that the driver driving two metres behind another is enraged that he is being held up. It is more likely that he is calculating that by being there he will either make the car in front speed up or pull over to let him past. The aggressive driver's calculation is not one that takes into account the risk of an accident as that considered too remote. The calculation is that getting past means getting to his destination earlier, while not getting past means getting home at the same time as if no attempt had been made.

### **The criminal**

There is also scope to consider the role of the “nasty person”. There are proven links between bad driving resulting in motoring offences and criminal and violent behaviour. Many of the people who are most aggressive on the roads appear to be people to whom aggression – and aggression to a criminal extent – is normal. One of the most reported of English roadrage cases – a murder - involved a man with a very violent criminal past.

### **Real aggression of perceived aggression**

In discussing aggression it is also important that the perception of aggression is looked at. There are suggestions that many drivers feel that they are the victim of aggressive following. But it may be the case that the driver behind would be blissfully unaware that he is even considered aggressive by the car in front. An AA survey in the mid 1990s showed that for every four drivers who claimed to have been struck a physical blow by another, one admitted to having struck such a blow. As the aggressive act became less serious more people admitted to both suffering and perpetrating the act. However, this pattern was broken by what was termed “aggressive tailgating” where those that suffered exceeded those who inflicted by ten to one. When this is associated with the fact that tailgating was the most prevalent form of perceived aggression the finding needs exploring.

Because of the British peculiarity of driving on the left, much work has been done looking at the risks posed by tourists. One particular piece by the Scottish Executive found that English drivers had a problem driving in Scotland, and particularly in having the skills to drive, and to overtake, on single carriageway roads. If this is the case there has to be an argument that the driver perceived as aggressive by the car in front is often quite the opposite. We may have drivers

quite happy to drive at (or above) the speed limit but who are too timid to overtake. Because of this they become perceived as aggressive by the people they follow. Much of the time the concept of aggression may not even have existed in the mind of the perceived aggressor.

In looking at driver aggression we need to look at many aspects, but we must not forget to look at the roles of:

- Instrumental aggression rather than hostile aggression - are people aggressive for personal gain?
- The role of criminals (or very nasty people) in driver aggression – are they nasty on the road because they are nasty everywhere?

and

- Perceived aggression - is all driving considered to be aggressive intended to be aggressive?

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