

THE HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY OF HUMAN EVIL: ERNEST BECKER AND ARTHUR KOESTLER



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Summary

Little effort has been made in psychology and psychiatry to study pathologies that afflict, not the aberrant neurotic or psychotic individual or social group, but the greater population of the psychologically normal. A study of such “universal pathologies” requires a focus on the “evil of banality,” and not the more restricted “banality of evil.” Where the latter phrase was used by Hannah Arendt to refer to the psychological normality of delimited groups of individuals who perpetrate evil (specifically, Nazi leaders during the Holocaust), the “evil of banality” refers to *pathologies of normality*—to the psychological constitution of the average person that predisposes him or her to participate in aggression and destruction. The article begins by summarizing conclusions reached in the author’s *The Pathology of Man: A Study of Human Evil* (Charles C. Thomas, 2005). This study provides an up-to-date frame of reference within which are discussed the complementary and insightful observations concerning human evil

made by two psychologically oriented humanists, Ernest Becker and Arthur Koestler.

Keywords: *human evil; Ernest Becker; Arthur Koestler; pathologies of normality*

Psychiatry and psychology have long neglected a serious study of human pathologies that are so widespread as to be virtually universal. Instead, the focus of clinical study has been on forms of psychopathology that afflict small segments of the total population—individuals diagnosed as neurotic or psychotic, and comparatively small aberrant groups afflicted by parallel disorders.

Hannah Arendt (1964) became known for her recognition of the “banality of evil,” that is, for seeing that many and perhaps most perpetrators of human suffering and atrocity are, in important ways, psychologically normal. Arendt’s focus, similar to that of psychopathology in the past, was narrowly limited: Her concern was to understand the psychology of individuals such as the Nazi leaders, and indirectly the destructive groups that they formed.

A greatly expanded and more inclusive focus is established if, instead, we seek to study the *evil of banality*, that is, the varieties of “universal pathology” that afflict psychologically normal individuals and their groups. At first glance, such an association of clinical pathology with the category of the psychologically normal appears to be self-contradictory, for we are accustomed to link psychopathology only with certain deviations from normality.

In *The Pathology of Man: A Study of Human Evil* (Bartlett, 2005), I brought together a wide range of psychiatric and psychological evidence in support of the contrary view, that psychological normality is frequently and in deeply seated ways the source of much that we judge to be pathological. There are unfortunately many pathologies that afflict the psychologically normal person. They include a varied and psychologically rewarding palette of emotional and cognitive gratifications provided by vicarious or direct participation in violence, by ideological rigidity and absolutism, obedience to perceived authority, prejudice and persecution, sheer self-defeating stupidity and low levels of moral development, and their many sequelae in genocides; terrorism; wars; publicly approved imprisonment, torture, and executions; school, domestic, social, and political bullying; an unappeasable appetite for human reproduction; the unquestioned placement of

human interests above those of all other life forms on the planet (see also Bartlett, 2002); the enforced subservience of nonhuman life to human wishes and convenience; and the resulting devastation of global biodiversity (also Bartlett, 2006). The list of human pathologies does not end here.

Central to human pathology, in the intended sense here of “human evil,” is human resistance to an awareness of it. “Denial” would be an understatement, for the forces that stand in the way of our species’ reflective consciousness of its malignancy are incredibly strong, tenacious, self-serving, and self-preserving.

As a result of this human recalcitrance to acknowledge our own pathology, in the history of behavioral science, and in particular in the history of psychology and psychiatry, almost no effort has been made to gain an understanding of human evil. Among psychiatrists there have been a few noteworthy exceptions with the courage to examine the pathological constitution of the ordinary person who so often is a willing participant in inflicting suffering, death, and destruction. But despite the work of these few researchers, psychology and psychiatry have doggedly reserved the term “pathology” exclusively for application to individuals and groups judged to be abnormal. This is short-sightedness in the extreme. For the great majority of human beings in all parts of the world possess an emotional and cognitive constitution that encourages them to behave and to think in pathogenic ways, i.e., in ways that are manifestly hurtful and destructive to other people, often, indeed, to themselves, as well as to other forms of life and to the resources on which all life depends.

I cannot in a single article defend these claims, which are supported in detail in the above-mentioned study. But for the purposes of this article it is important to have the larger frame of reference in mind. Within this context readers are asked to bear in mind the following two fundamental claims, which are presupposed here and developed at length in Bartlett (2005). The claims are these: Among those issues of overriding importance to humanity’s and the world’s future none is more imperative than a clear comprehension of the psychological realities that underlie human evil, for our unrecognized pathologies comprise the greatest threat to the future of the species, as well as to that of many others with which we share this planet. And, second, reaching an effective understanding of human pathology no more reflects misanthropy than does, to give a parallel example, the search for

clinical understanding of physiological malignancy. Given the unbounded pride we so often take in our species and the ease with which many people take offense at its criticism, a few words from the book's Introduction are in order:

There is much that human beings have created that is wonderful, inspiring, and good. . . . [T]here is nothing here that denies or depreciates these things. But just as concrete, detailed descriptions of examples of good health are largely irrelevant in a medical compendium of diseases, so are instances of human goodness largely irrelevant to our present focus. (Bartlett, 2005, p. 7)

The science of pathology has its appropriate subject matter, of which the pathology of man forms a usually ignored part.¹

It is of course not necessary to be a credentialed psychiatrist or psychologist to reach psychological insight, for academic degrees do not make the man any more than clothes. In this article, I have brought together the psychologically focused observations and reflections of two men whose training and experience of the world had little in common, who lacked advanced formal education in psychology, and yet who shared a deep concern to understand human evil in psychological terms. Although they came from very different backgrounds, each was touched in his personal life by the brutalities of war. The conclusions concerning human evil at which they arrived were similar, while the explanations they offered have much in common with those formulated by the professionally trained psychiatrists and psychologists whose observations are discussed in Bartlett (2005).

Because their work is situated outside the formal boundaries of psychiatry and psychology, and in view of their training, it has seemed appropriate to me to call the accounts they have given "humanistic." The observations and judgments expressed by Ernest Becker and Arthur Koestler lend support to those of professional psychiatrists and psychologists who have studied human evil, while their work may provide an accessible entrance into the psychology of human evil for humanistically inclined scholars. This concurrence of judgment is important because much of our psychiatric and psychological understanding of human evil rests on the fundamental agreement in individual clinical judgment of researchers who have studied the phenomenon and who have brought their intellectual and moral intelligence² to bear on matters of universal concern.

ERNEST BECKER

I have considered it my task to talk about the terror. There is evil in the world.

—Becker (in Keen, 1974, p. 73)

Ernest Becker (1924-1974) was a cultural anthropologist by formal education and later an independent student of psychotherapy. His thought has not received the attention it deserves, especially within psychiatry and psychology. Becker is best known for his book *The Denial of Death* (1973), for which he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, although it came 2 months after his death. Becker received his PhD in 1960 from Syracuse University and was appointed to teach anthropology for the Department of Psychiatry at the Upstate Medical Center of the State University of New York. While there, Becker was befriended by antiestablishment psychiatrist Thomas Szasz, who became an important mentor to Becker. Szasz made it possible for Becker to see patients in the psychiatric hospital. In addition, Becker gave lectures to the Center's psychiatric interns.

During his short life, his iconoclastic ideas led him, or forced him, to live a gypsy existence, teaching at a succession of universities. These institutions of higher learning, putatively committed to academic freedom, repeatedly dismissed him for his freedom of thought. He had the unappreciated audacity, for example, to question the propriety of universities to apply for and receive research funding from the military and from corporate America. And he questioned the legitimacy of psychiatry's classification of behavior as "mental illness" when the true reason for stigmatizing such behavior, he believed, is that it causes society to feel uncomfortable. Becker's students thought highly of him. At the University of California at Berkeley, when he was dismissed from his teaching position, his students fought for his reinstatement on the regular faculty, but were unsuccessful. Becker was forced to teach noncredit classes, and so he moved on. He taught at San Francisco State during S. I. Hayakawa's tenure as its president and then moved to Simon Fraser University, where he taught in an interdisciplinary department of political science, anthropology, and sociology, where the openness suited him better. Sadly, Becker died of cancer at the age of 49. One cannot help but wonder whether a more accepting, supportive, and less frustrating world would have allowed him to live a longer life.

Becker did not allow disciplinary territorialism to stand in the way of his interest in developing a unified science of man. He published numerous books that reflected his familiarity with anthropology, sociology, social psychology, and psychoanalysis (Becker, 1962a, 1964, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1973, 1975). He was especially concerned to develop what he called "a comprehensive theory of social evil" (e.g., Becker, 1972). During his youth, at the age of 18, he had enlisted in the army and served in an infantry battalion that liberated a Nazi concentration camp. This experience, among others in his personal life, contributed to his interest in studying human evil.

Becker's understanding of human evil and his interpretation of human pathology will concern us here. His theory of human evil can be summarized around 10 central claims and observations that are dispersed in his writing and have not previously been brought together so that we might appreciate the unitary view that they form.

First, a science of man³ can never be "value-neutral" as in the natural sciences, nor should it be. The appropriate conceptual framework for an integrated science of man is one that recognizes that human experience and behavior, and their interpretation by human beings, cannot be investigated, at least not by the species' own members, from the "outside." Therefore, Becker argued, a science of man cannot help but be imbued with human values (cf. Becker, 1962a, 1968, 1969). From this point of view, he claimed, it is legitimate to speak of "human evil" in the context of scientific study. He wanted to promote a critical, scientific examination of man which would shun hopeful consolations that do not derive from an empirical understanding. What the species requires is "a stark picture of the human condition without false consolations" (Becker, quoted in Keen, 1974, p. 79). The result would be an approach that is at once empirical, not consoling, but—and this is of course objectionable to many scientists—permeated with human values.

Second, according to Becker, mankind's destructiveness toward members of his own species is the result of his unwillingness to accept death and his yearning for immortality. As a consequence of death-denial, people identify themselves with their favored ideologies and are willing to lay down their lives for them, believing that their systems of belief will confer individual immortality on them. Men and women would rather forsake their lives in defense of their ideologies than live without the solace they provide (Becker, 1975, pp. 64-65). As Otto Rank said, "Every conflict

over truth is in the last analysis just the same old struggle over . . . immortality” (Becker, 1975, p. 4, quoting Rank, 1961, p. 18).

If anyone doubts this, let him try to explain in any other way the life-and-death viciousness of all ideological disputes. Each person nourishes his immortality in the ideology of self-perpetuation to which he gives his allegiance; this gives his life the only abiding significance it can have. No wonder men go into a rage over the fine points of belief: if your adversary wins the argument about truth, *you die*. Your immortality system has been shown to be fallible, your life becomes fallible. History, then, can be understood as the succession of ideologies that console for death. (Becker, 1975, p. 64)

And so, human societies, in Becker’s (1975) view, become “standardized systems of death denial” (p. 154).

Third, Becker (1975) argued that mankind’s ideologies are *lies*: They are mystifications that man tells himself in order to deny death (p. 175). Fourth, human beings see any opponent capable of threatening their cherished lies, be it an individual or a nation, to be *evil*. And so, ironically, the greatest evil of man comes to be exhibited in his “heroic” struggle against what he perceives to be evil. What, then, is the highest development and use of mankind’s talents? It is, ironically:

To contribute to the struggle against evil, of course. In other words, man is fated, as William James saw, to consider this earth as a theater for heroism, and his life as a vehicle for heroic acts which aim precisely to transcend evil. To be a true hero is to triumph over disease, want, death. . . . [I]f we add together the logic of the heroic with the . . . fetishization of evil, we get a formula that is no longer pathetic but terrifying. It explains almost all by itself why man, of all animals, has caused the most devastation on earth—the most real evil. He struggles extra hard to be immune to death because he alone is conscious of it; but by being able to identify and isolate evil arbitrarily, he is capable of lashing out in all directions against imagined dangers of this world. This means that in order to live he is capable of bringing a large part of the world down around his shoulders. (Becker, 1975, pp. 149-150)

As Hegel had said long before, men and women frequently cause evil “out of good intentions” (Becker, 1975, p. 151). Among these intentions is, fifth, the urge to obey authority, to be good at one’s job, to be a good citizen, to live up to the standards of patriotism, and to do one’s duty on behalf of one’s group’s ideology. For human beings derive much of their sense of safety, well-being,

worth, and self-esteem from acceptance by their social group, so that socially acceptable performance is prized (cf. Becker, 1973, chap. 7; Liechty, 1995, pp. 15-16). And socially acceptable performance is generally tied to submission to authority.

Do we have to state the obvious, and say that we have long known what causes armies of men to march to slaughter and genocide? It is not man's aggressiveness, but rather his fearfulness and automatic submissiveness to authority. This is the sickness at the heart of the creature, that makes him so terrible in the animal kingdom. . . . (Becker, 1969, p. 188)

Sixth, Becker believed that human aggression is largely learned rather than instinctual, that it is often a learned response to frustration, a response that serves to increase the aggressor's self-esteem (Becker, 1962a). He noted in connection with such frustration that, seventh, people have the propensity to take out their personal problems on others. In other words, they engage in scapegoating.

Where is human energy directed if not at objects—human objects most of the time? The playwright Eugene Ionesco summed up what he thought was the real problem . . . in this lament: "As long as we are not assured of immortality, we shall never be fulfilled, we shall go on hating each other in spite of our need for mutual love." . . . We know the terrifying dynamic of victimage and scapegoating all across history, and we know what it means . . . break the bones and spill the blood of the victim in the service of some "higher truth" that the sacrificers alone possess. (Becker, 1975, pp. 136-137, 159)

Eighth, human beings receive basic and fulfilling emotional gratification from bringing their enemies to their knees, from snuffing out their existence and trampling on their memory.

We can talk for a century about what causes human aggression; we can try to find the springs in animal instincts, or we can try to find them in bottled-up hatreds due to frustration or in some kind of miscarried experiences of early years, of poor child handling and training. All of these would be true, but still trivial because men kill out of joy, in the experience of expansive transcendence over evil. (Becker, 1975, p. 155)

Ninth, when people behave and think in ways that embody the previous interwoven patterns—killing one another in an effort to

deny death and achieve an illusory immortality based on lies, perpetrating evil in the name of waging war against it, often with “good intentions,” victimizing others, and deriving emotional gratification in the process—human beings are evil. In saying this, Becker clearly made a moral judgment. One is tempted to associate the moral condemnation implicit in Becker’s judgment with the claim that human evil is an individual and social pathology. The status of the category of “pathology” is, however, ambiguous in Becker’s writing. On one hand, he seems to have understood pathology—with “mental illness” in view—as behavior that “people come jointly to define [as] the kind of performance which makes all uncomfortable together, and they share in condemning it” (Becker, 1962a, p. 146). On the other hand, to call human evil pathological, as I believe Becker would have considered appropriate, it is necessary to define “pathology” less restrictively. In this sense, and under some circumstances, it would be legitimate to judge the behavior of an entire society to be pathological—despite the fact that its members fail to be uncomfortable about their own behavior or to condemn it. Becker probably had such a meaning of universal pathology in mind when he wrote, “all through history it is the ‘normal, average men’ who, like locusts, have laid waste to the world in order to forget themselves” (Becker, 1973, p. 187). Human evil is perpetrated not only by the abnormally malicious, but by the “fat, jolly ones—people who have had abundant childhood care and love! The man who dropped the atomic bomb is the warm, gentle boy who grew up next door” (Becker, 1975, p. 141). Becker expressed the wish to study “the pathology that lies hidden beneath normality” (Keen, 1974, p. 73).

Finally, in reflecting on the preceding nine basic claims about human behavior, psychology, and its study, Becker concluded that, tenth, the most promising way for the human species to heal its propensity to evil is to develop independence of critical judgment so that people no longer succumb to “herd enthusiasms and herd fears” (Becker, 1975, p. 161). This is the task of education. As did many of the psychiatrists and psychologists whose work is discussed in Bartlett (2005), Becker recognized that to assign such a task to education is to express a goal that is ideal, perhaps utopian. He dedicated his book *The Revolution in Psychiatry* (1964) “[t]o the society which will value man. And which, consequently, will institute a *fully human education* as a dominant human value” (p. vii). But how we are to get from here to there is an unanswered question.

Given Becker's interest in psychotherapy, it was natural for him to take up the heated issue posed by the psychiatric classification of "mental illness." He asked whether it is appropriate to apply the medical label of "illness" to individuals who have no known organic dysfunction. Becker supported Szasz's attack on what both felt is a questionable and prejudicial medicalization of certain kinds of problems that people have in the course of living. When society disapproves of the behavioral, emotional, or cognitive responses that people have to "problems of living," psychiatry takes the initiative on behalf of society and labels these responses "mental illnesses." As an anthropologist, Becker recognized that behavior judged to be deviant in one society is often accepted in another. Szasz was concerned about the involuntary commitment to mental institutions of people whose behavior does not accord with society's norms. Becker also was concerned. He wrote,

Psychiatry, in sum, is at present little more than a pseudo-scientific discipline which directive manipulates individuals in the interests of the social *status quo* and the personal aggrandizement of the psychiatrists. The definitions of "normal" and "abnormal" that are used with such facility [*sic*] to pass judgment on largely defenseless patients are bogus. That is, these definitions have no scientific grounding, and cannot have. They derive from culturally normative prescriptions for proper behavior. Psychiatry, therefore, has no valid claim to the guise of a science. . . . Its aim has been to fit people back into a social system whose basic values were not questioned. (Becker 1962, pp. 172-173)

Since psychiatry's classifications of mental illness make recourse to socially relative norms to define the meaning of "pathology," it was only a step further for Becker to ask whether the labeling of certain emotions, attitudes, and behaviors as "evil" is also socially relative. Unfortunately, relativism is the primary theoretical stumbling block for theories of human evil. Although Becker was a cultural anthropologist—anthropology being the field, after all, from which concerns about cultural relativism originate—the tone of his books suggests that he was not a *moral* relativist when it comes to the fundamental values that are negated by human evil. He returned occasionally in his writings to the question raised by relativism, he struggled with it, but never answered it, in a convincing and fully developed way (see, e.g., "The Sociology of Knowledge and the Problem of Relativity," in Becker, 1962b). Had his life not been cut short, very likely he would have had more to say about the issue.⁴

Ernest Becker's account of human evil, drawn from his knowledge of several disciplines, evidently does not give a glowing picture of the normal human psychological constitution. In one of his books, Becker quoted the French philosopher Claude-Adrien Helvétius, whose words express what Becker in his heart perhaps came to feel about man:

Woe to the prince who trusts in the basic goodness of people. Mr. Rousseau believes it, but experience belies it. Whoever consults experience learns that the child drowns flies, beats his dog, suffocates his sparrow, and that, born without innate ideas, the child has all the vices of the adult. By force he appropriates his friend's goodies and jewels; in order to gain a doll he does what in ripe age one does for a title or a throne. (Becker, 1969, p. 174, quoting Helvétius, 1772/1909, p. 219, Becker's translation)

Becker was drawn to the study of human behavior and its psychology by a desire to improve human life. But "he was finally forced to conclude that the inevitability of progress in human history was open to great doubt, and that, furthermore, there is a worm at the core of human nature" (Liechty, 1995, p. 24). Becker was no magician, and could offer no realistic cure for human evil. Toward the end of his life, as he developed a deeper and clearer understanding of the nature and magnitude of human evil, his optimism for social scientific solutions waned, and he seems to have invested any hopes that remained in him, perhaps because he could find no other credible alternative, in the possible future spiritual growth of the species.

ARTHUR KOESTLER

We cannot wait for another hundred thousand years, hoping for a favorable mutation to remedy our ills. We must engineer that mutation ourselves, by biological methods which are already within our reach.

—Koestler (quoted in Levene, 1984, p. 138)

Arthur Koestler (1905-1983), whose life nearly coincided with Konrad Lorenz's and whose psychological observations paralleled those of Lorenz,⁵ was an articulate man of independent, penetrating intelligence. Although his reputation rests primarily on his essays and novels, Koestler's contributions to the study of human evil deserve a careful hearing.

Koestler was born in Budapest and attended the University of Vienna before becoming a journalist and science writer. During the Spanish Civil War, he served as a war correspondent for the *British News Chronicle*. He was imprisoned by Franco as an alleged spy, and without a hearing was sentenced to be executed. Through the intervention of friends in England he was eventually released. This harrowing experience led to his highly successful books *Spanish Testament* (1937; called *Dialogue With Death* in the American edition, 1942) and *Darkness at Noon* (1941a), published in 30 languages. Toward the beginning of World War II, Koestler was again imprisoned, this time in the French concentration camp of Le Vernet. In the end he was released, again thanks to British intervention, and once more Koestler found in his experiences the material for a book, *Scum of the Earth* (1941b). He then joined the British Army and became a British citizen in 1948. In 1951, an act by the U.S. Congress granted Koestler permanent residency in America.

In addition to writing fiction, Koestler was committed to scientific writing, in which he expressed a knowledge of a wide range of research—in neurophysiology, molecular biology, and ethology. Two of his nonfiction books offer a detailed analysis of human evil: *The Ghost in the Machine* (1967) and *Janus: A Summing Up* (1978). Both works express a deeply rooted concern for the human species, an unflinching determination to understand its dark side, and a desire to develop ways of reducing human evil.

Koestler's approach, like Lorenz's, focuses in part on human behavioral psychology and in part on issues closely related to epistemology. Koestler (1967) expressed his understanding of human evil in clear language, "We ought to give serious consideration to the possibility that somewhere along the line something has gone seriously wrong with the evolution of the nervous system of *Homo sapiens*" (p. 239). It appears to be "a flaw, some potentially fatal engineering error built into our native equipment—more specifically, into the circuits of our nervous system" (Koestler, 1978, p. 5). He attributed the origin of human evil to what he therefore called a "constructional fault" in man, which leads to a split mind: The species has developed a capacity for reason, but its emotional constitution is by far the dominant force in human behavior (Koestler, 1967, p. 272). Perhaps, Koestler conjectured, the human brain underwent an evolutionary enlargement that is genuinely pathological.⁶ Whatever its origin, the split between

reason and emotion, between the phylogenetically old and new brain, between instinct and reason, leads, according to Koestler, to a “pathology of devotion.” Men and women project their inner preferences so that they appear to them to be transcendent—so that their preferences appear to possess an existence independent of their perceptions and interpretations. It is as though “a primitive television screen . . . combines, and often confuses, projections from the internal visceral environment with the external environment” (Koestler, 1967, p. 283). When human beings do this, they engage in self-deception and delusion, endowing their projections with a life of their own that can become more important to them than their individual lives. Belief in life after death, belief in a transcendent deity, belief in the projected, autonomously existing reality of one’s nation, religion, or political ideology for which life should be sacrificed—all are examples of this form of delusional thinking. The objects of all of these beliefs are reified beyond possible experience. They are among a varied group of what I have elsewhere called “conceptual pathologies” that underlie much destructive human thinking and its expression in behavior.⁷

When groups of people separate themselves from other groups by emphasizing their own group’s differences, they characteristically develop belief systems that are closed. Their systems of beliefs become hermetic so that their propounders refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of alternative views and values, which they judge to be alien and inferior. Under the right conditions, which unfortunately occur often, the belief systems of opposing human groups lead to collective aggressive hysteria, a propensity that Koestler (1967) claimed is endemic to the species and epidemic in its contagiousness. Mankind’s generally low intelligence coupled with its high emotionality (p. 266) take the form of a “mental sickness” that Koestler identified as a “pathology.” Its symptoms include (a) a propensity of the human species to kill its own members, for example, in ritual sacrifice and the killing of heroes and leaders to appease imagined gods (Koestler, 1978, p. 6). Further symptoms of the pathology are (b) an absence of instinctive safeguards against killing others of the species; (c) the above-mentioned chronic “quasi-schizophrenic split between reason and emotion, between man’s rational faculties and his irrational, affect-bound belief”; and (d) the species’ unbalanced development, in which intellectual faculties advance but moral faculties remain primitive (Koestler, 1978, pp. 6-7).

These symptoms of pathology are widespread, so much so that in Koestler's (1978) view it makes sense to speak of a "streak of insanity running through the history of man" (p. 96). The universality of the pathology shows that it is not accidental, but "inherent in the human condition" (p. 95). The consequences of human pathology have been deadly and have become more deadly with the passage of time as the species develops increasingly lethal weapons and its population proliferates. Koestler (1978) referred to the ethological observation that, unlike other species, the human species has no safeguards against overbreeding:

[I]n this respect, too, man is a biological freak, who, somewhere along the way, lost this instinctual control-mechanism. It seems almost as if in human populations the ecological rule were reversed; the more crowded they are in slums, ghettos and poverty-stricken areas, the faster they breed. What prevented the population from exploding much earlier in history was not the kind of automatic feedback control which we observe in animals, but the death-harvest of wars, epidemics, pestilence and infant mortality. (p. 100)

Koestler (1967) visualized two charts, which he contrasted, one "showing the explosive increase in people, knowledge, power, and communications" and the other

indicating the progress of social morality, ethical beliefs, spiritual awareness and related values. This chart will yield a curve of quite different shape. It, too, will show a very slow rise during the nearly flat prehistoric miles; then it will oscillate with inconclusive ups and downs through what we call civilised history; but shortly after the exponential curve gets airborne, the "ethical curve" shows a pronounced downward trend, marked by two World Wars, the genocidal enterprises of several dictators, and new methods of terror combined with indoctrination, which can hold whole continents in their grip.

The contrast between these two curves gives certainly an oversimplified, but not an over-dramatised view of our history. They represent the consequences of man's split mind. (p. 319)

There are, Koestler believed, immediate causes for human evil, which sustain and promote this historical trend. First, there is the species' "integrative tendency," by which Koestler meant the wish of people to submit to authority, to identify with a social group, and to give their uncritical acceptance to closed systems of belief (Koestler, 1978, p. 79). These three human characteristics lead to the willingness among men, women, and even children to

abrogate self-responsibility. These widely shared characteristics lead “harmless citizens” to become “torturers,” to become devoted to a cause, a cause that is transformed and elevated into a delusional transcendent reality by the human “pathology of devotion” (Koestler, 1967, pp. 233-235).

Second, human beings typically are immune to reason. Koestler did not mince words. He believed that “we are a mentally sick race, and as such deaf to persuasion” (Koestler, 1967, p. 339). The species’ competing and mutually exclusionary belief systems are walled off from one another to such an extent that people are recalcitrant to appeals to their reason: “*Homo sapiens* is not a reasonable being—for if he were, he would not have made such a bloody mess of his history; nor are there any indications that he is in the process of becoming one” (Koestler, 1978, p. 5). In this context, Koestler (1978) quoted Ludwig von Bertalanffy:

The human cortex contains some ten billion neurons that have made possible the progress from stone axe to airplanes and atomic bombs, from primitive mythology to quantum theory. There is no corresponding development on the instinctive side that would cause man to mend his ways. For this reason, moral exhortations, as proffered through the centuries by the founders of religion and great leaders of humanity, have proved disconcertingly ineffective. (p. 8)

Given the preponderance of historical evidence that supports this thesis, Koestler concluded, “To go on preaching sweet reason to an inherently unreasonable species is, as history shows, a fairly hopeless enterprise” (Koestler, 1978, p. 332).

Mankind’s integrative tendency and his immunity to reason are further exacerbated by what Koestler called the species’ propensity to engage in “self-transcendence”—another aspect of the pathology of devotion. Without it, “each man is a mean little island” (Koestler, 1967, p. 260). But with it, each man becomes more than he is: He partakes in the glory of his group’s projected delusions; he becomes part of something that is greater than himself, something he believes will endure after his death, a transcendent reality manufactured to fit his preferences and therefore guaranteed to satisfy them.

[T]he glory and the tragedy of the human condition both derive from our powers of self-transcendence. It is a power which can be harnessed to creative or destructive purposes; it is equally capable of turning us into artists or killers, but more likely into killers. It

can restrain selfish impulses, but also arouse violent emotions experienced on behalf of the entity with whom the identificatory rapport has been established. Injustices, or pretended injustices, inflicted on that entity are likely to generate more fanatical behaviour than the sting of a personal insult. (pp. 245-246)

Self-transcendence offers the majority of people the only readily available fulfillment of their need to belong. The majority, according to Koestler, finds in its self-created transcendent delusions the satisfaction of its “craving for communion” that comes from “identification with clan, tribe, nation, Church, or party, submission to its leader, worship of its symbols, and uncritical, child-like acceptance of its emotionally saturated system of beliefs” (Koestler, 1978, p. 93).

By surrendering their identities to their transcendent delusions, human beings achieve a comforting anesthesia of their critical faculties. People impair their own individuality and the insecurities that individuality brings (Koestler, 1967, p. 246). Koestler cited the examples of participants at revivalist meetings, tarantula dancers in the Dark Ages, the collective hallucinations of Loudun nuns, crowds passionately engaged in lynchings, revelries of witnesses to hangings at Newgate, the cheering partakers in the Nuremberg rallies and Red Square parades.

All these phenomena—some harmless, some sinister, some grotesque—have one basic element in common: the people participating in them have to some extent surrendered their independent personalities, become more or less de-personalised; while their impulses have to the same extent become synchronised, aligned in the same direction like magnetised files of iron. The force which binds them together is variously called “social infection,” “mutual induction,” “collective hysteria,” “mass hypnosis,” etc.; the common element of all is identification with the group at the price of relinquishing part of one’s personal identity. (Koestler, 1967, p. 248)

This abrogation of self, the urge to lose in the herd mind the insecurities and responsibilities of personal identity, is similar, Koestler observed, to Freud’s description of group hypnotic trance, in which there is a “profound alteration in the mental activities of individuals subjected to the influence of a group” (quoted in Koestler, 1967, p. 251). Koestler added, “It is a kind of resonance effect, which makes the members of the crowd feel that they are part of an irresistible power; moreover, a power which *ex hypothesi cannot do wrong*” (p. 251). The eager participants in the

collective mind gain a psychological advantage that they did not have as individuals: They are given the freedom to unleash aggression, to give their hostile impulses free rein. This, for Koestler, becomes the psychological basis for war.

In war, the "self-transcending identification" of the individual with his or her group and its preferred set of beliefs allows men and women to release a core set of emotions, which brings them profound and often immediate gratification. Loyalty to the group becomes noble, heroic, an end-in-itself. Loyalty is the emotional cement that binds the herd together. "Without loyalty to tribe, church, flag or ideal, there would be no wars" (Koestler, 1967, p. 253). The species' pathologically distorted sense of devotion that inspires people to go to war and their obedience to transcendent self-deceptions are firmly entrenched and unlikely to be changed:

A dispassionate observer from a more advanced planet who could take in human history from Cro-Magnon to Auschwitz at a single glance, would no doubt come to the conclusion that our race is in some respects an admirable, in the main, however a very sick biological product; and that the consequences of its mental sickness far outweigh its cultural achievements when the chances of prolonged survival are considered. The most persistent sound which reverberates through man's history is the beating of war drums. Tribal wars, religious wars, civil wars, dynastic wars, national wars, revolutionary wars, colonial wars, wars of conquest and of liberation, wars to prevent and to end all wars, follow each other in a chain of compulsive repetitiveness as far as man can remember his past, and there is every reason to believe that the chain will extend into the future. (Koestler, 1978, pp. 2-3)

In addition to pathological devotion and delusional self-transcendence, in Koestler's (1978) view there is another element that plays a leading role in inciting human aggression. That is "man's deadliest weapon" (p. 15): his language and symbols. The ordinary man is "as susceptible to being hypnotized by slogans as he is to infectious diseases" (p. 15). The soldier who leaves his family, his home, and his country to wage war on an unknown enemy in a distant land is not chiefly motivated by defensive territorial fears, but by his devotion to the symbols that represent for him the value of his belief system. They may have their origin in his group's teachings, religious commandments, or political imperatives. "Wars," according to Koestler, "are not fought for territory, but for words" (p. 15). By identifying with his group, "the individual is transformed into a killer. This is the infernal dialectic

reflected in man's history of wars, persecution and genocide. And the main catalyst of that transformation is the hypnotic power of the word" (pp. 15-16).

Words and cultural symbols play a dominant role in ideologies, which are no more than belief systems that have become self-inflated and self-enclosed to the point that their propounders reject competing beliefs with an attitude of disdainful and dismissive superiority. In this connection, Koestler combined psychological and epistemological interests in his concern to understand the relationship between the emotional behavior of the human species and its cognitive system. Koestler's (1967) observations are perceptive and worth quoting,

A closed system is a cognitive structure with a distorted, non-Euclidean geometry in curved space, where parallels intersect and straight lines form loops. Its canon is based on a central axiom, postulate or dogma, to which the subject is emotionally committed, and from which the rules of processing reality are derived. The amount of distortion involved in the processing is a matter of degrees, and an important criterion of the value of the system. It ranges from the scientist's involuntary inclination to juggle with data as a mild form of self-deception, motivated by his commitment to a theory, to the delusional belief systems of clinical paranoia. When Einstein made his famous pronouncement "if the facts do not fit the theory, then the facts are wrong" he spoke with his tongue in his cheek; but he nevertheless expressed a profound feeling of the scientist committed to his theory. . . . [I]f geniuses sometimes indulge in these non-Euclidian games where reasoning is guided by emotional bias, it is an individual bias, a hunch of their own making; whereas the group mind receives its emotional beliefs ready-made from its leaders or from its catechism. (p. 264)

Koestler (1967) went on to say that such a closed system of thought is *paranoid*: It is a delusional system that has an inner consistency for its believers and that is highly resistant to change in light of conflicting evidence. It has three main characteristics: The delusional system is believed to express a universal truth that provides an answer to all human needs, which is used to explain everything. Second, it is impervious to refutation by evidence, since its adherents are willing to process information only in terms of the system of interpretation to which they are committed. "The processing is done by sophisticated methods of casuistry, centered on axioms of great emotive power, and indifferent to the rules of common logic; it is a kind of Wonderland croquet,

played with mobile hoops” (p. 263). And last, such a delusional system deflects all potential criticism of it by interpreting the motivation of any opponent by means of the explanatory terms set forth by the closed system. As a result of a delusional system’s facility in shape-shifting to accommodate new evidence and resist opposition, “[r]ational arguments have little impact on the true believer, for the creed to which he is emotionally committed can be contradicted by evidence without losing its magic power” (p. 255). In short, a closed system of thought offers no access to communication “from the outside”; its system of cognitive defenses makes it impossible to question its fundamental tenets.

A closed system . . . is a cognitive matrix with a distorted logic, the distortion being caused by some central axiom, postulate, or dogma, to which the subject is emotionally committed, and from which the rules of processing the data are derived. (Koestler, 1967, p. 289)

A closed system of thought capitalizes on the vicious internal circularity of its method of responding to outside challenges. Thanks to its circular logic, “[t]he true believer . . . can prove to his satisfaction everything he believes, and he believes everything he can prove” (Koestler, 1967, p. 290). For the believer, his understanding of the world, his emotional approach to it, and the behavior he is motivated to engage in, often to the point of death, all of these are built upon a pathological way of interpreting experience. Experience is, one might say, remapped by the following features: (a) the closed system’s immunity to conflicting evidence, that is, its self-insulating ability to seal itself off from opposition; (b) the unbridgeable separation of human reason and emotion; (c) the closed system’s universalizability; (d) irrefutability; and (e) what I have elsewhere called its self-validating character (Bartlett, 1970, 1975, 1976, 1983, 1992, 2002; Bartlett & Suber, 1987) or, as Koestler (1978) expressed a related claim, “Irrational beliefs are saturated with emotion; they are *felt* to be true. Believing [can then be] described as ‘knowing with one’s viscera’” (p. 96). Together, these forces support and maintain a cognitive dynamic that reinforces the species’ emotion-dominated response to any form of opposition that questions the needs and interests of the closed system. And many human cognitive frameworks are closed in this way: an ideology, a nation’s or a corporation’s self-interested policies, a body of religious dogma, any group’s self-centered manifesto, or generally, homocentric selfishness.⁸

Koestler's account of human evil stands on two legs: One leg is the support provided by the paranoid's defensive, delusional, closed system of thinking; the other is the support provided by human emotionality, an emotion-dominated attitude of passionate commitment to the transcendent projections of pathological belief. To this psychological basis, Koestler then added observations of the human species' generally low intelligence; its primitive level of moral development; its propensity to kill others; its willfulness in surrendering individual identity to transcendent delusions, anaesthetizing critical faculties in the process; its infatuation with symbols that glorify the tenets of closed systems of belief; and finally, the species' unchecked overbreeding. This summarizes a perceptive and clear account of the psychology of human evil that has not received the attention it deserves.

Koestler did not believe in the power of forgiveness as an aid to improving the human condition. In an appendix to one of his books ("On Not Flogging Dead Horses," Appendix II in Koestler, 1967), he ridicules the human tendency to forgive past brutalities simply because they are, after all, past. It is clear that Koestler did not think much of the French maxim "*tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*" ("to understand everything is to forgive all"). Instead, his writings express a deep frustration and impatience with man, and a desire to overcome human evil by changing the psychological and cognitive constitution of the species. Similar to the psychiatrists and psychologists whose work is discussed in Bartlett (2005), Koestler was not able to propose a plausible, constructive solution. However, he did imagine a solution of sorts, which he felt might be accommodated within the species' pathogenic outlook. This was a pharmacological solution. He did not like the solution, but it seemed to him the only one that would not be rejected in a reflex arc of belief system antagonism.

What we are concerned with is a cure for the paranoid streak in what we call normal people, i.e., mankind as a whole: an artificially simulated, adaptive mutation to bridge the rift between the phylogenetically old and new brain, between instinct and intellect, emotion and reason. If it is within our reach to increase man's suggestibility, it will be soon within our reach to do the opposite, to counteract misplaced devotion and that militant enthusiasm, both murderous and suicidal, which we see reflected in the pages of the daily newspaper. The most urgent task of biochemistry is the search for a remedy in . . . the spectrum of chemical agents which can be used for the control of the mind. . . . [Such an

approach would have as its goal] . . . a state of dynamic equilibrium in which thought and emotion are re-united, and hierarchic order is restored. . . . A mental stabilizer would produce neither euphoria, nor sleep, nor mescaline visions, nor cabbage-like equanimity—it would in fact have no noticeably specific effect, except promoting cerebral coordination and harmonising thought and emotion; in other words, restore the integrity of the split hierarchy. Its use would spread because people like feeling healthy rather than unhealthy in body or mind. It would spread as vaccination has spread, and contraception has spread, not by coercion but by enlightened self-interest. (Koestler, 1967, pp. 336-337)

Koestler (1967) recognized the drawbacks of this “solution”:

What worries me is that [the reader] will not like it; that he might be repelled and disgusted by the idea that we should rely for our salvation on molecular chemistry instead of a spiritual rebirth. I share his distress, but I see no alternative. (p. 338)

Of course, even to consider such a “solution,” one needs to be firmly persuaded that the human species is, indeed, afflicted by pathology—by a group of disorders that are not deviations from normal psychology, but are, in reality, themselves normal and present in the majority of people. Koestler’s hopeful speculations about a neurochemical that might rectify man’s neurological imbalance were published, as he himself acknowledged, “as the only alternative to despair that I could (and can) see” (Koestler, 1978, p. 103). He believed that

to neutralize these pathogenic tendencies does not seem an impossible task. Medicine has found remedies for certain types of schizophrenic and manic-depressive psychoses; it is no longer utopian to believe that it will discover a combination of benevolent enzymes which provide the neocortex with a veto against the follies of the archaic brain, correct evolution’s glaring mistake, reconcile emotion with reason, and catalyse the breakthrough from manic to man. (Koestler, 1978, p. 20)

If the reader is “repelled or disgusted” by such a solution, at least he or she will recognize that Koestler tried hard to be practical, to take into account the many human obstructions that stand, psychologically and cognitively, in the way of meaningful attempts to reduce human evil. It is unlikely that Koestler truly believed that the pharmacological solution could really be implemented on a worldwide scale, administering drugs that would

bring peace to many billions of people. But it was the only plausible solution he could offer.

The psychological study of human evil, of the pathologies responsible for mankind's willingness to inflict suffering on others and often himself in the process, is still in its earliest stage of development. Most people—many psychiatrists and psychologists included—do not want to think about human pathology and are quick to dismiss the subject of “human evil” as an expression of misanthropy. This easy rejection and the denial it expresses have been central to the perpetuation of human pathology. The topic is too important to humanity's future for us to tolerate its continued neglect. If we are to gain control over our own worst enemies—ourselves, and specifically our psychologically normal constitution that fosters pathology while disowning it—we have no other constructive alternative than to begin by gaining an effective understanding of the psychological causes of human pathology, of human evil in all its manifestations.

NOTES

1. Given that the article's focus is human pathology, readers may be interested in the author's discussion elsewhere of the psychology of individuals who exhibit high degrees of what he has called “moral intelligence,” an area of study in its own right. These are individuals who are comparatively resistant to the psychological and cognitive gratifications of human evil. They are often, for example, people who have a general aversion to cruelty and violence; they may be conscientious objectors in wars; they may be people who refuse generally to participate in socially, religiously, and politically endorsed aggression against others; and so forth (Bartlett, 2005, chap. 12, “Those Who Actively Resist,” and chap. 18).

2. For a detailed elaboration of the concept of moral intelligence, see Bartlett (2005, chap. 18).

3. This is Becker's phrase. As was the convention at the time they wrote, both Becker and Koestler used generic masculine nouns and pronouns to refer to people in general. Numerous quotations from their publications that use such language are interwoven in this article. When stylistically appropriate, I use gender-neutral language or terms that specifically include women and children, yet are balanced with a need to use language compatible with Becker's and Koestler's in the surrounding text. Readers will recognize that the subject matter here is self-evidently the human species as a whole; the masculine or feminine sex is never the subject of discussion.

4. See Bartlett (2005, Part III) for a developed answer to the question that relativism poses in connection with human evil.

5. For a discussion of Lorenz's contribution to the psychology of human evil, see Bartlett (2005, chap. 10).

6. This conjecture was made earlier by Judson Herrick (1956, pp. 398-399), a work cited by Koestler. For a discussion of Herrick and related researchers, see Bartlett (2005, pp. 48-53).

7. The justification of these claims is complex and cannot be given here. For a general overview of conceptual pathologies, see Bartlett (2005, Part III). For technical proofs that make use of mathematical logic and epistemological analysis, see Bartlett (1970, 1975, 1976, 1982, 1983).

8. For a discussion of the human species' narcissism, see Bartlett (2002, 2006).

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