The Urge to Self Destruction

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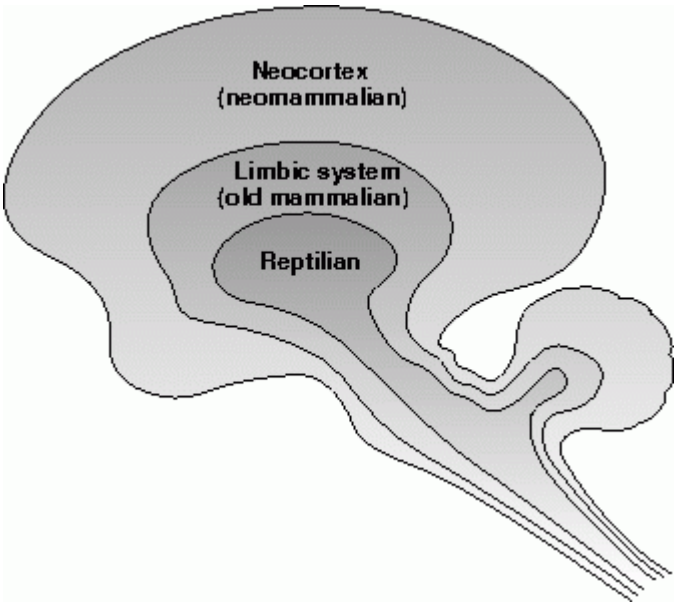

The crisis of our time can be summed up in a single sentence. From the dawn of consciousness until the middle of our century man had to live with the prospect of his death as an individual; since Hiroshima, mankind as a whole has to live with the prospect of its extinction as a biological species.

This is a radically new prospect; but though the novelty of it will wear off, the prospect will not; it has become a basic and permanent feature of the human condition.

There are periods of incubation before a new idea takes hold of the mind; the Copernican doctrine which so radically downgraded man's status in the universe took nearly a century until it got a hold on European consciousness. The new downgrading of our species into the status of mortality is even more difficult to digest.

But there are signs that in a devious, roundabout way the process of mental assimilation has already started. It is as if the explosions had produced a kind of psychoactive fall-out, particularly in the younger generation, creating such bizarre phenomena as hippies, drop-outs, flower people and barefoot crusaders without a cross. They seem to be products of a kind of mental radiation sickness which causes an intense and distressing experience of meaninglessness, of an existential vacuum, which the traditional values of their elders are unable to fill.

These symptoms will probably wear off. Already the word Hiroshima has become a historic cliché like the Boston Tea Party or the Storming of the Bastille. Sooner or later we shall return to a state of pseudo-normality. But there is no getting away from the fact that from now onward our species lives on borrowed time. It carries a time-bomb fastened round its neck. We shall have to listen to the sound of its ticking, now louder,

now softer, now louder again, for decades and centuries to come, until it either blows up or we succeed in de-fusing it.

Our concern is with the possibility of such a de-fusing operation. Obviously it requires more than disarmament conferences and appeals to sweet reasonableness. They have always fallen on deaf ears, for the simple reason that man is perhaps a sweet, but certainly not reasonable being; nor are there any indications that he is in the process of becoming one. On the contrary, the evidence seems to indicate that at some point during the last explosive stages of the biological evolution of *homo sapiens* something has gone wrong. that there is a flaw, some subtle engineering mistake built into our native equipment which would account for the paranoid streak running through our history. This seems to me an unpleasant but plausible hypothesis, which I have developed at some length in a recent book.[1] Evolution has made countless mistakes; Sir Julian Huxley compared it to a maze with an enormous number of blind alleys. For every existing species hundreds must have perished in the past; the fossil record is a wastebasket of the Chief Designer's discarded hypotheses. To the biologist, it should appear by no means unlikely that *homo sapiens*, too, is the victim of some minute error in construction - perhaps in the circuitry of his nervous system - which makes him prone to delusions, and urges him towards self-destruction. But *homo sapiens* has also the unique resourcefulness to transcend biological evolution and to compensate for the shortcomings of his native equipment. He may even have the power to cure that congenitally disordered mental condition which played havoc with his past and now threatens him with extinction. Or, if he cannot cure it, at least to render it harmless.

The first step towards a possible therapy is a correct diagnosis.

There have been countless diagnostic attempts from the Hebrew prophets to contemporary ethologists, but none of them have sounded very convincing, because none of them started from the premise that man is an aberrant species, suffering from a biological malfunction, a species-specific disorder of behaviour which sets it apart from all other animal species - just as language, science and art sets it apart in a positive sense. The creativity and the pathology of man are two sides of the same medal, coined in the same evolutionary mint. I am going to propose a short list of some of the pathological symptoms reflected in the perverse history of our species, and then pass from the symptoms to the presumed causative factors. The list of symptoms has five main headings.

First, at the very beginning of history, we find a striking phenomenon to which anthropologists seem to have paid little attention: human sacrifice. It was a ubiquitous ritual which persisted from the prehistoric dawn to the peak of pre-Columbian civilizations, an in some parts of the world, to the beginning of our century. From the Scandinavian Bog People to the South Sea Islanders, from the Etruscans to the pre-Columbian cultures, these practices arose independently in the most varied civilizations, as manifestations of a perverted logic to which the whole species was apparently prone. It is epitomized in one of the early chapters of Genesis, where Abraham prepares to cut the throat of his son out of sheer love of God. Instead of dismissing the subject as a sinister curiousity of the past, the universality and paranoid character of the ritual should be regarded as symptomatic.

The *second* symptom to be noted is the weakness of the inhibitory forces against the killing of con-specifics, which is virtually unique in the animal kingdom. As Konrad Lorenz has recently emphasized, the predator's act of killing the prey

should not be compared to murder, and not even be called aggressive, because predator and prey always belong to different species - a hawk killing a fieldmouse can hardly be accused of homicide. Competition and conflict between members of the same animal species is settled by ritualized combat or symbolic threat-behaviour which ends with the flight or surrender gesture of one of the combatants, and hardly ever involves lethal injury. In man, however, this built-in inhibitory mechanism against killing con-specifics is notably ineffective.

This leads to the third symptom: intraspecific warfare in permanence, with its sub-varieties of mass persecution and genocide. The popular confusion between predatory and bellicose behaviour tends to obscure the fact that the law of the jungle permits predation on other species, but forbids war within one's own; and that homo sapiens is the unique offender against this law (apart from some controversial warlike phenomena among rats and ants).

As the fourth symptom I would list the permanent, quasi-schizophrenic split between reason and emotion, between man's critical faculties and his irrational, affect-charged beliefs; I shall return to this point.

Lastly, there is the striking, symptomatic disparity between the growth-curves of technological achievement on the one hand and of ethical behaviour on the other; or, to put it differently, between the powers of the intellect when applied to mastering the environment, and its impotence when applied to the conduct of human affairs. In the sixth century B.C. the Greeks embarked on the scientific adventure which, a few months ago, landed us on the moon. That surely is an impressive growth-curve. But the sixth century B.C. also saw the birth of Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism; the twentieth of Stalinism,

Hitlerism and Maoism. There is no discernible curve. We can control the motions of satellites orbiting the distant planets but cannot control the situation in Northern Ireland. Prometheus is reaching out for the stars with an empty grin on his face and a totem-symbol in his hand.

So far we have moved in the realm of facts. When we turn from symptoms to causes, we must have recourse to more or less speculative hypotheses. I shall mention five such hypotheses, which are interrelated, but pertain to different disciplines, namely neurophysiology, anthropology, psychology, linguistics, and lastly eschatology.

The neurophysiological hypothesis is derived from the so-called Papez-MacLean theory of emotions. Though still controversial in some respects, it is supported by twenty years of experimental research, and has for quite some years attained textbook respectability. The theory is based on the structural and functional differences between the phylogenetically old and recent parts in the human brain which, when not in acute conflict, seem to lead a kind of agonized coexistence. Dr MacLean has summed up this state of affairs in a technical paper, but in an unusually picturesque way:

Man finds himself in the predicament that nature has endowed him essentially with three brains which, despite great differences in structure, must function together and communicate with one another. The oldest of these brains is basically reptilian. The second has been inherited from lower mammals, and the third is a late mammalian development, which . . . has made man peculiarly man. Speaking allegorically of these brains within a brain, we might imagine that when the psychiatrist bids the patient to lie on the couch, he is asking him to stretch out alongside a horse and a

crocodile.[3]

Substitute for the individual patient humanity at large, for the clinical couch the stage of history, and you get a dramatized, but essentially truthful, picture. The reptilian and primitive mammalian brain together form the so-called limbic system which, for simplicity's sake, we may call the old brain, as opposed to the neocortex, the specifically human 'thinking-cap' which contains the areas responsible for language, and abstract and symbolic thought. The neocortex of the hominids evolved in the last half-million years, from the middle Pleistocene onward, at an explosive speed, which as far as we know is unprecedented in the history of evolution. This brain explosion in the second half of the Pleistocene seems to have followed the type of exponential curve which has recently become so familiar to us -~ population explosion, knowledge explosion, etc. - and there may be more than a superficial analogy here, as both curves reflect the phenomenon of the acceleration of history on different levels. But explosions do not produce harmonious results. The result in this particular case seems to have been that the newly developing structures did not become properly integrated with the phylogenetically older ones - an evolutionary blunder which provided rich opportunities for conflict. MacLean coined the term *schizophysiology* for this precarious state of affairs in our nervous system. He defines it as:

a dichotomy in the function of the phylogenetieally old and new cortex that might account for differences between emotional and intellectual behaviour. While our intellectual functions are carried on in the newest and most highly developed part of the brain, our affective behaviour continues to be dominated by a relatively crude and primitive system, by

archaic structures in the brain whose fundamental pattern has undergone but little change in the whole course of evolution, from mouse to man.[4]

To put it crudely: evolution has left a few screws loose somewhere between the neocortex and the hypothalamus. The hypothesis that this form of schizophysiology is built into our species could go a long way to explain symptoms Nos. 4 and 5. The delusional streak in our history, the prevalence of passionately held irrational beliefs, would at last become comprehensible and could be expressed in physiological terms. And any condition which can be expressed in physiological terms should ultimately be accessible to remedies.

My next two putative causes of man's predicament are the state of protracted dependence of the neonate on its parents, and the dependence of the earliest carnivorous hominids on the support of their hunting companions against prey faster and more powerful than themselves; a mutual dependence much stronger than that among other primate groups, out of which may have developed tribal solidarity and its later nefarious derivatives. Both factors may have contributed to the process of moulding man into the loyal, affectionate and sociable creature which he is; the trouble is that they did it only too well and overshot the mark. The bonds forged by early helplessness and mutual dependence developed into various forms of bondsmanship within the family, clan or tribe. The helplessness of the human infant leaves its lifelong mark; it may be partly responsible for man's ready submission to authority wielded by individuals or groups, his quasi-hypnotic suggestibility by doctrines and commandments, his overwhelming urge to belong, to identify himself with tribe or nation, and, above all, with its system of beliefs. Brain-washing starts in the cradle. (Konrad Lorenz uses

the analogy of imprinting, and puts the critical age of receptivity just after puberty. But there are two limitations to this analogy: the susceptibility for imprinting stretches in man from the cradle to the grave; and what he is imprinted with are mostly symbols.)

Now, historically speaking, for the vast majority of mankind, the belief-system which they accepted, for which they were prepared to live or die, was not of their own choice, but imposed on them by the hazards of the social environment, just as their tribal or ethnic identity was determined by the hazards of birth. Critical reasoning played, if any, only a subordinate part in the process of accepting the imprint of a credo. If the tenets of the credo were too offensive to the critical faculties, schizophysiology provided the modus vivendi which permitted the hostile forces of faith and reason to coexist in a universe of doublethink - to use Orwell's term.

Thus one of the central features of the human predicament is this overwhelming capacity and need for identification with a social group and/or a system of beliefs which is indifferent to reason, indifferent to self-interest and even to the claims of self-preservation. Extreme manifestations of this self-transcending tendency - as one might call it - are the hypnotic rapport, a variety of trance-like or ecstatic states, the phenomena of individual and collective suggestibility which dominate life in primitive and not so primitive societies, culminating in mass hysteria in its overt and latent form. One need not march in a crowd to become a victim of crowd-mentality - the true believer is its captive all the time.

We are thus driven to the unfashionable and uncomfortable conclusion that the trouble with our species is not an over- dose of self-asserting aggression, but an excess of self-transcending

devotion. Even a cursory glance at history should convince one that individual crimes committed for selfish motives play a quite insignificant role in the human tragedy compared with the numbers massacred in unselfish love of one's tribe, nation, dynasty, church or ideology. The emphasis is on unselfish. excepting a small minority of mercenary or sadistic disposition, wars are not fought for personal gain, but out of loyalty and devotion to king, country or cause.

Homicide committed for personal reasons is a statistical rarity in all cultures, including our own. Homicide for unselfish reasons, at the risk of one's own life, is the dominant phenomenon in history. Even the members of the Mafia feel compelled to rationalize their motives into an ideology, the Cosa Nostra, 'our cause'.

The theory that wars are caused by pent-up aggressive drives which can find no other outlet has no foundation either in history or in psychology. Anybody who has served in the ranks of an army can testify that aggressive feelings towards the so-called enemy hardly play a part in the dreary routine of waging war: boredom and discomfort, not hatred; homesickness, sex-starvation and longing for peace dominate the mind of the anonymous soldier. The invisible enemy is not an individual on whom aggression could focus; he is not a person but an abstract entity, a common denominator, a collective portrait. Soldiers fight the invisible, impersonal enemy either because they have no other choice, or out of loyalty to king and country, the true religion, the righteous cause. They are motivated not by aggression, but by devotion.

I am equally unconvinced by the fashionable theory that the phylogenetic origin of war is to be found in the so-called 'territorial imperative'. The wars of man, with rare exceptions,

were not fought for individual ownership of bits of space. The man who goes to war actually leaves the home which he is supposed to defend, and engages in combat hundreds or thousands of miles away from it; and what makes him fight is not the biological urge to defend his personal acreage of farmland or meadows, but - to say it once more - his loyalty to symbols and slogans derived from tribal lore, divine commandments or political ideologies. Wars are fought for words. They are motivated not by aggression, but by love.

We have seen on the screen the radiant love of the Fuhrer on the faces of the Hitler Youth. We have seen the same expression on the faces of little Chinese boys reciting the words of the Chairman. They are transfixed with love like monks in ecstasy on religious paintings. The sound of the nation's anthem, the sight of its proud flag, makes you feel part of a wonderfully loving community.

Thus, in opposition to Lorenz, Ardrey and their followers, I would suggest that the trouble with our species is not an excess of aggression, but an excess of devotion. The fanatic is prepared to lay down his life for the object of his worship as the lover is prepared to die for his idol. He is equally prepared to kill anybody who represents a supposed threat to that idol. Here we come to a point of central importance. You watch a film version of the Moor of Venice. You fall in love with Desdemona and identify yourself with Othello (or the other way round); as a result the perfidious Iago makes your blood boil. Yet the psychological process which causes the boiling is quite different from facing a real opponent. You know that the people on the screen are merely actors or rather electronic projections - and anyway the whole situation is no personal concern of yours. The adrenalin in your bloodstream is not produced by a primary biological drive or hypothetical killer-

instinct. Your hostility to Iago is a vicarious kind of aggressivity, devoid of self-interest and derived from a previous process of empathy and identification. This act of identification must come first; it is the conelitio sine qua non, the trigger or catalyst of your dislike of Iago. In the same way, the savagery unleashed in primitive forms of warfare is also triggered by a previous act of identification with a social group, its rousing symbols and system of beliefs. It is a depersonalized, quite unselfish kind of savagery, generated by the group-mind, which is largely indi erent, or even opposed, to the interests of the individuals who constitute the group. Identification with the group always involves a sacrifice of the individual's critical faculties, and an enhancement of his emotional potential by a kind of group-resonance or positive feedback. Thus the mentality of the group is not the sum of individual minds; it has its own pattern and obeys its own rules which cannot be 'reduced' to the rules which govern individual behaviour. The individual is not a killer; the group is, and by identifying with it the individual is transformed into a killer. This is the infernal dialectics reflected in our history. The egotism of the group feeds on the altruism of its members; the savagery of the group feeds on the devotion of its members.

All this points to the conclusion that the predicament of man is not caused by the aggressivity of the individual, but by the dialectics of group-formation; by man's irresistible urge to identify with the group and espouse its beliefs enthusiastically and uncritically. He has a peculiar capacity - and need - to become emotionally committed to beliefs which are impervious to reasoning, indifferent to self-interest and even to the claims of self-preservation. Waddington has called man a belief-accepting animal. He is as susceptible to being imprinted with slogans and symbols as he is to infectious diseases. Thus

one of the main pathogenic factors is hyper-dependence combined with suggestibility. If science could find a way to make us immune against suggestibility, half the battle for survival would be won. And this does not seem to be an impossible target.

The next item in this inventory of the possible causes of man's predicament is language. Let me repeat: wars are fought for words. They are man's most deadly weapon. The words of Adolf Hitler were more effective agents of destruction than thermonuclear bombs. Long before the printing press and the other mass media were invented, the fervent words of the prophet Mohammed released an emotive chain-reaction, whose blast shook the world from Central Asia to the Atlantic coast. Without Words there would be no poetry - and no war. Language is the main source of our superiority over brother animal - and, in View of its explosive potentials, the main threat to our survival.

Recent field-studies of Japanese monkeys have revealed that different tribes of a species may develop surprisingly different habits - one might almost say, different cultures. Some tribes have taken to washing bananas in the river before eating them, others do not. Sometimes migrating groups of banana-washers meet non-washers, and the two groups watch each other's strange behaviour with apparent bewilderment. But unlike the inhabitants of Lilliput, who fought holy crusades over the question whether eggs should be broken on the broad or pointed end, the banana-washing monkeys do not go to war with the non-washers, because the poor creatures have no language which would enable them to declare washing an ethical commandment and eating unwashed bananas a deadly heresy.

Obviously, the safest remedy for our ills would be to abolish language. But as a matter of fact, mankind did renounce language long ago - if by language we mean a universal means of communication for the whole species. Other species do possess a single system of communication by sign, sound or odour, which is understood by all its members. Dolphins travel a lot, and when two strangers meet in the ocean they need no interpreter. The Tower of Babel has remained a Valid symbol. According to Margaret Mead, among the two million Aborigines in New Guinea, 750 different languages are spoken in 7 50 villages, which are at permanent war with one another. Our shrinking planet is split into several thousand language-groups. Each language acts as a powerful cohesive force within the group and as an equally powerful divisive force between groups. Fleming detests Walloon, Maharati hates Gujerati, French Canadian despises Anglo-Saxon, differences in accent mark the boundary between the upper and lower classes within the same nation.

Thus language appears to be one of the main reasons, perhaps the main reason, why the disruptive forces have always been stronger than the cohesive forces in our species. One might even ask whether the term 'species' is applicable to man. I have mentioned that Lorenz attributed great importance to the instinct-taboo among animals against the killing of members of their own species; yet it may be argued that Greeks killing Barbarians, Moors killing Christian dogs did not perceive their victims as members of their own species. Aristotle expressly stated that 'the slave is totally devoid of any faculty of reasoning'; the term Bar-bar-ous is imitative of the alien's gibberish or the barking of a dog; honest Nazis believed that Jews were Untermensehen - not human but hominid. Men show a much greater variety in physique and behaviour than

any animal species (except for the domesticated products of selective breeding); and language, instead of counteracting intraspecific tensions and fratrieidal tendencies, enhances their virulence. It is a grotesque paradox that we have communication satellites which can make a message visible and audible over the whole planet, but no planet-wide language to make it also understandable. It seems even more odd that, except for a few stalwart Esperantists, neither Unesco nor any other international body has made a serious effort to promote a universal *lingua franca* - as the dolphins have.

The fifth and last pathogenic factor on my list is man's awareness of his mortality, the discovery of death. But one should rather say: its discovery by the intellect, and its rejection by instinct and emotion. We may assume that the inevitability of death was discovered, through inductive inference, by that newly acquired thinking-cap, the human neocortex; but the old brain won't have any of it ; emotion rebels against the idea of personal non-existence. This simultaneous acceptance and refusal of death reflects perhaps the deepest split in man's split mind; it saturated the air with ghosts and demons, invisible presences which at best were inscrutable, but mostly malevolent, and had to be appeased by human sacrifice, by holy wars and the burning of heretics. The paranoid delusions of eternal hell-fire are still with us. Paradise was always an exclusive club, but the gates of hell were open to all.

Yet once more we have to look at both sides of the medal: on one side religious art, architecture and music in the cathedral on the other, the paranoid delusions of eternal hell-fire, the tortures of the living and the dead.

To sum up, I have listed five conspicuous symptoms of the

pathology of man as reflected in the terrible mess we have made, and continue to make, of our history. I have mentioned the ubiquitous rites of sacrifice in the prehistoric dawn; the poverty of instinct-inhibition against the killing of con-specifics: intra-specific warfare in permanence; the schizoid split between rational thinking and irrational beliefs; and lastly the contrast between man's genius in mastering the environment and his moronic conduct of human affairs. It should be noted that each and all of these pathological phenomena are species-specific, that they are uniquely human, not found in any other animal species. It is only logical therefore that in the search for explanations we should concentrate our attention on those characteristics of man which are also exclusively human and not shared by other animals. Speaking in all humility, it seems to me of doubtful value to attempt a diagnosis of man entirely based on analogies with animal behaviour - Pavlov's dogs, Skinner's rats, Lorenz's greylag geese, Morris's hairless apes. Such analogies are valid and useful as far as they go. But by the nature of things they cannot go far enough, because they stop short of those exclusively human characteristics - such as language - which are of necessity excluded from the analogy, although they are of decisive importance in determining the behaviour of our species. There is no human arrogance involved in saying that dogs, rats, birds and apes do not have a neocortex which has evolved too fast for the good of its possessor; that they do not share the protracted helplessness of the human infant, nor the strong mutual dependence and esprit de corps of the ancestral hunters. Nor the dangerous privilege of using words to coin battle-cries; nor the inductive powers which make men frightened to death by death. These characteristics which I have mentioned as possible causative factors of the human

predicament, are all specifically and exclusively human. They contribute to the uniqueness of man and the uniqueness of his tragedy. They combine in the double helix of guilt and anxiety which, like the genetic code, seems to be built into the human condition. They give indeed ample cause for anxiety regarding our future; but then, another unique gift of man is the power to make his anxiety work for him. He may even manage to de-fuse the time-bomb around his neck, once he has understood the mechanisms which make it tick. Biological evolution seems to have come to a standstill since the days of Cro-Magnon man; since we cannot expect in the foreseeable future a beneficial mutation to put things right, our only hope seems to be to supplant biological evolution by new, as yet undreamt-of techniques. In my more optimistic moments my split brain suggests that this possibility may not be beyond our reach.

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