

CXXIV – Is Mankind a Mistake?

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By Butler Shaffer

I am often asked whether I think we humans are, by nature, vicious savages. Given mankind's dreary historical record for wars, genocides, torture, and other organized methods of mutual destruction, are we destined to be the only species to drive itself to extinction by mass slaughter? Arthur Koestler posed that question years ago, suggesting that empowering a killer ape with great intelligence may have made mankind an evolutionary mistake.

It is easy, in days such as these, to concur in Koestler's assessment. Nation-states war with one another, each seeking more powerful weapons of massive annihilation with which to not only subdue, but destroy, their professed adversaries. Politicians and academicians openly defend the use of torture against suspected members of any group serving as the enemy du jour; while men and women exhibit a callousness to the deaths and sufferings even of small children who had the misfortune of having been born into a society of "thems."

Mankind's history has long been a trail marked by blood and broken bodies. But note the circumstances under which such wholesale butchery occurs: only when we organize ourselves into groups with which we identify our sense of being. There are, and always will be, individuals with sadistic and murderous dispositions, and not all of them work at the White House or the Pentagon. Contrary to the tenets of our political conditioning, our protection from the predations of the random brute is almost always dependent upon what you and I do to defend ourselves. Police officers — no matter how well-intended — are almost never able to prevent acts of victimization. Ask the ghosts of John F. Kennedy and Lee Harvey Oswald if this is not the case.

When we are functioning as individuals — whether at work, in the marketplace, among friends, or driving on the freeways — our behavior toward one another tends to be peaceful and respectful. Few of us would be willing to personally inflict, even upon strangers, the brutalities that so many eagerly cheer on when performed by agents of the state with which we identify ourselves. We would quickly find ourselves without friends were we to behave toward them in ways that emulate Dick Cheney's or Donald Rumsfeld's recommended treatment of Iraqis. How welcome would a Madeleine Albright be in your community were she to announce that the brutal deaths of neighborhood children was a price she was willing to pay for the advancement of her career? How long would you continue working for an employer who hired Lynndie England as your immediate supervisor?

In one-to-one dealings with our fellow humans, we have a remarkably good record, behaving as anarchists (i.e., respecting the inviolability of the lives and property interests of others, and being responsible for the consequences of our actions). Virtually all of what you and I do in our personal lives is contrary to the coercive, violent, destructive, death-inflicting behavior of political systems. It is when we remove ourselves from our personal relationships with others and organize ourselves into abstract entities (e.g., the nation-state) that we let loose upon the rest of humanity those "dark side" forces that political systems find it so easy and profitable to mobilize into destructive campaigns. Our basic decency as individuals tends to dissolve when we become members of collective mobs.

Koestler's query misconceives the nature of the troublesome human condition. If we were as disposed to killing our residential neighbors as we are our worldly ones, his suggestion of a lemming-like self-destructiveness might be more persuasive. The creative role of intelligence on the planet might then shift to the more loving and cooperative nature of dolphins. I have long suspected that the mocking smile of these creatures reflects their greater understanding of us than we have of them! Perhaps, like the mammals that prospered following the extinction of the dinosaurs, the dolphins are simply awaiting their special turn.

But I am not prepared to accede to the implications of Koestler's prognosis. The respect and loving cooperation that individuals are able to exhibit even toward total strangers — as reflected in responses to the devastation of New Orleans or the Asian tsunami — affords a more optimistic picture. Perhaps an awareness of the broader consequences of our genetic selfishness — to borrow from Richard Dawkins — will allow us to understand how our common interests are a coalescence of our individual interests; that what we share with one another is the need to protect our inviolability.

The state depends for its existence upon division and its ensuing conflict. It would not long survive in an atmosphere in which people understood their common interest in respecting one another's being. State schools exist for the purpose of conditioning people to accept the nation-state as the source of their personal identities; to get them to believe that their interests and the interests of the state are identical; and that other systems represent hostile forces to be opposed through the coercive arm of the state. Students learn to recite daily catechisms of allegiance to the state, and to inculcate their duties of obedience to constituted authorities. In the words of Ivan Illich, "school is the advertising agency which makes you believe that you need the society as it is."

Through years of such conditioning, most of us have learned to see the world as an inherently dangerous and destructive place; seeing ourselves — in Housman's phrase — as "a stranger and afraid, in a world I never made;" and embracing vertically-structured organizations, with their top-down authority, as the only safe and effective model for social

systems. This is why our children – awash in the depictions of nobility and adventure painted by the statist — become such eager victims of a war system that more experienced adults know to be grounded in lies.

Perhaps all of this is changing, and we are not fated, like our lemming cousins, to destroy ourselves in collective and frenzied stampedes to foreign beaches. As our decentralized information systems continue their exponential growth, we seem to be discovering an increased awareness of the destructive nature of the state with its mechanisms of centralized power. In addition to its "dark side" influences, our unconscious minds also have intuitive, emotional voices that warn us of impending dangers of which our conscious minds may be unaware. The processes of decentralization, in other words, may also be at work within our minds, producing what Carl Jung characterized as "individuation," (i.e., the acceptance of our "dark side" and consequent withdrawal of such energies from collective forces).

There are subconscious forces at work upon our lives whose hidden energies often appear as precursors to social changes. One such example was Rosa Parks, who has been credited with "starting" the civil rights movement in the late 1950s. Her refusal to move to the back of a bus was not so much the cause of this movement, as it was a bifurcation point — to borrow a phrase from the study of chaos — that unleashed a great deal of pre-existing energy. Similar forces are, I believe, at work in our present world. Cindy Sheehan's success in challenging the Iraq war has occurred because she tapped into an energy field of people who resent the sacrifice of their children to the war machine. Widespread reaction to the U.S. Supreme Court's recent Kelo decision — upholding the power of states to condemn privately-owned land for transfer to other private owners (a practice that has long preceded this case) — has aroused the sentiment "we do not want our property taken by the state."

Likewise, the anti-globalization demonstrations throughout the world may represent more than just some pent-up socialist or neo-Luddite hostility to free markets and industrialization. They may also reflect a concern that the corporate-state political systems housed within nation-states are being redesigned for a world government to enforce a universal, destructive, institutional will upon all of mankind.

What if, in other words, these influences are coalescing to express the latent message: we are tired of you taking the lives of our children; we are tired of you taking our property; and we are tired of you taking our liberty? What if that is the message state authorities are hearing, but do not want you to hear? What if a life force is permeating upwards through the collective unconscious of mankind to confront its destructive nemesis, the state, with a message that says no more than this: "enough!" What if such hidden energies are proving so powerful that the state has had to resort to lies, fears, and violence to shore up, by the most forceful means available to it, the foundations of a repressive structure crumbling before decentralizing systems?

Our dispositions toward our neighbors tend to be peaceful, cooperative, and respectful, at least as long as we regard them as neighbors, rather than as abstractions defined for us, by state authorities, as our "enemies." The capacity to recognize — and to act upon — such distinctions lies within the mind of each of us, if we will but take the responsibility to do so, and to understand the consequences if we do not.

If we are prepared to explore our own thinking, and to follow the movement of our own thought, we may be able to transcend our institutionalized conditioning by discovering that, because "war is the health of the state," our best strategy for survival — both as individuals and as a species — is to never allow ourselves to become politically organized.

The Best of Butler Shaffer

