

Human Survival: A Psycho-Evolutionary Analysis

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The great experiment in consciousness, human evolution, now stands at a precipice of its own making. That same consciousness which struggled for millions of years to ensure human survival is now on the verge of depleting its planet's resources, rendering its environment uninhabitable, and fashioning the instruments of its own self-annihilation. Can this consciousness (we) develop the wisdom *not* to do these things? Can we foster sufficient self-understanding to reduce our destructiveness, and mature rapidly enough to carry us through this evolutionary crisis? These are surely the most crucial questions of our time, or of any time. Today we face a global threat of malnutrition, overpopulation, lack of resources, pollution, a disturbed ecology, and nuclear weapons. At the present time, from 15 to 20 million of us die each year of malnutrition and related causes; another 600 million are chronically hungry, and billions live in poverty without adequate shelter, education, or medical care (Brandt, 1980; Presidential Commission on World Hunger, 1979). The situation is exacerbated by an exploding population that adds another billion people every 13 years, depletes natural resources at an ever-accelerating rate, affects "virtually every aspect of the earth's ecosystem (including) perhaps the most serious environmental development . . . an accelerating deterioration and loss of the resources essential for agriculture" (Council on Environmental Quality, 1979, p. 32). Desertification, pollution, acid rain, and greenhouse warming are among the more obvious effects.

Overshadowing all this hangs the nuclear threat, the equivalent of some 20 billion tons of TNT (enough to fill a freight train 4 million miles long), controlled by hair-trigger warning systems, and creating highly radioactive wastes for which no permanent storage sites exist, consuming over \$660 billion each year in military expenditure, and threatening global suicide (Schell, 1982; Sivard, 1983; Walsh, 1984). By way of comparison, the total amount of TNT dropped in World War II was only 3 million tons (less than a single large nuclear warhead). The Presidential Commission on World Hunger (1979) estimated that \$6 billion per year, or some four days worth of military expenditures, could eradicate world starvation. While not denying the role of political, economic, and military forces in our society, the crucial fact about these global crises is that all of them have psychological origins. Our own behavior has created these threats, and, thus, psychological approaches may be essential to understanding and reversing them. And to the extent that these threats are determined by psychological forces within us and between us, they are actually symptoms—symptoms of our individual and collective state of mind. These global symptoms reflect and express the faulty beliefs and perceptions, fears and fantasies, defenses and denials, that shape and misshape our individual and collective behavior. The state of the world reflects our state of mind; our collective crises mirror our collective consciousness.

Attempts to deal with global crises solely by traditional economic, political, or military means will certainly have limited success. If efforts to deal with nuclear weapons, for example, focus solely on establishing equal stockpiles, the underlying psychological forces that fuel the arms race will go untouched. To cure, or at least produce significant long-term improvement, demands more than symptomatic treatment. It demands not just food for the starving and reduction of nuclear stockpiles, but also psychological understanding and personal sacrifice. Developing understanding may be one of the most urgent tasks facing our generation and may determine the fate of all future generations.

We have clearly created a world situation that demands unprecedented psychological and social maturation if we are to survive. Until now, we have been able to cover or compensate for our psychological shortcomings. We have been able to consume without fear of depletion, discard wastes without fear of pollution, bear children without fear of overpopulation,

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and fight without fear of extinction. We have been able to act out our psychological immaturities rather than having to understand and outgrow them, to indulge our addictions rather than resolve them, and to revolve through the same neurotic patterns rather than evolve out of them. But if the world is a stage, it is now no longer big enough for us to continue playing out our psychological immaturities. It is time for us to grow up, and we ourselves have created the situation which may force us to do so.

This growing up that is now demanded of us, this psychological maturation, this development of consciousness, is a form of evolution. For evolution is of both bodies and minds, of matter and consciousness (Wilber, 1981). "Evolution is an ascent towards consciousness," wrote Teilhard de Chardin, and this view has been echoed by Eastern thinkers such as Aurobindo (1963, p. 27), who said that "evolution of consciousness is the central motive of terrestrial existence" and that our next evolutionary step would be "a change of consciousness." This means conscious evolution—a conscious choosing of our future, driven by necessity but steered by choice (McWaters, 1981). Aurobindo said, "Man occupies the crest of the evolutionary wave. With him occurs the passage from an unconscious to a conscious evolution" (Elgin, 1980). This is not only evolution but it is the evolution of evolution.

Because this psychological maturation is demanded of us, our global crises may function as an evolutionary catalyst. And from this perspective, these current crises can be seen not as an unmitigated disaster but as a challenge, a push to new evolutionary heights. They can be seen as a call to each and every one of us, both individually and collectively, to become and contribute as much as we can. This perspective gives us both a vision of the future and a motive for working toward it.

Is this image idealistic? Yes, indeed it is! But this is by no means bad. Our situation seems to demand nothing less, and idealistic

images can be very helpful if used skillfully. Unfortunately, our usual use of ideals is far from skillful. We tend to regard them as hopelessly unattainable, and we either scoff or give up in despair; or we use them as excuses for punishing ourselves when we fail to attain them. Either approach only ensures more pain and failure.

A skillful way to use ideals is to see them not just as goals that must be reached, but as guiding images or visions that provide signposts and directions for our lives and decisions. Such images attract us to actualize them and ourselves. This is the way we must view the evolutionary image; we must not automatically dismiss it as hopelessly idealistic. Rather, we need to see the possibilities it offers for guidance and direction, for escaping our current quandary, and for realizing our human potential. Humanistic, transpersonal, Jungian, Eastern, and some existential psychologists agree that the challenge of individual maturation and evolutionary advance must be a major human motive. "The basic actualizing tendency is the only motive which is postulated in this system," said the great humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers (1959).

To fulfill this demand may be deeply rewarding. Failing to fulfill it may result not only in a lack of growth, but in a particular kind of psychological suffering, a kind which often goes unrecognized. For when these actualizing needs go ungratified, their effects are subtle, existential, and therefore less easily identified. "In general, they have been discussed through the centuries by religionists, historians, and philosophers under the rubric of spiritual or religious shortcomings, rather than by physicians, scientists, or psychologists" (Maslow, 1971). Maslow called them "metapathologies" and described examples such as alienation, meaninglessness, and cynicism, as well as various existential, philosophical, and religious crises. These are the very symptoms that have increasingly plagued Western societies in recent decades (Yalom, 1980) and that contribute to the growing sense of social unrest. The very immaturities and failures of psychological growth from which our global crises stem are surely central to the prevailing psychological malaise of our time.

A perspective that views these global crises as a potential evolutionary catalyst may help in several ways. Research shows that when people face a life-threatening crisis they feel a desperate need to restore self-esteem by attempting to regain mastery of the situation

and by finding some sense of meaning in it (Taylor, 1983).

An evolutionary view meets these needs well. It provides a sense of meaning on a grand scale—a scale that encompasses the totality of contemporary threats, includes individuals and the entire species, and transcends all traditional, national, and political boundaries. It enhances self-esteem by seeing our current situation, not as final proof of human inadequacy and futility, but rather as a self-created challenge to speed us on our evolutionary journey. It motivates us to regain mastery of the situation and demands that we fulfill our individual and collective potential far more than at any time in history. It also provides an antidote to the metapathologies of purposelessness and alienation that have been growing in developed countries during recent decades.

By their own theories of human nature, psychologists have the power of elevating or degrading that same nature. Debasing assumptions debase human beings; generous assumptions exalt them. (Allport, 1964)

The evolutionary perspective provides a meaningful and inspiring view of our contemporary predicament and exalts human nature at the same time.

This perspective has dominated human thought and action during other periods of great transformation. Analyses of the few truly major transformations of human self-image throughout history suggest that they all combined a broad synthesis of knowledge with an evolutionary view of humankind (Mumford, 1956). Great thinkers such as Plato and Thomas Aquinas, who sparked transformations, said that the first order of business for humanity is to align ourselves with this evolution. But where will this evolution take us? What is our destiny in the universe? To answer this is to go beyond objective facts and to state our personal philosophy, our faith, and our worldview.

The two extreme worldviews are probably represented by materialism and *the perennial philosophy*, the central core of understanding common to the great religions. The materialistic perspective suggests that life and consciousness are accidental byproducts of matter, and that their evolution is driven by the interplay of random events and the instinct for survival. The purpose of human life and evolution is solely what humanity decides it is.

The perennial philosophy, which lies at the heart of the great religions and is increas-

ingly said to represent their deepest thinking (Huxley, 1944), suggests that consciousness is central and its development is the primary goal of existence. This development will culminate in the condition variously known in different traditions as enlightenment, liberation, salvation, *moksha*, or *satori*.

The descriptions of this condition show remarkable similarities across cultures and centuries (Walsh & Vaughan, 1980). Its essence is the recognition that the distortions of our usual state of mind are such that we have been suffering from a case of mistaken identity. Our true nature is something much greater, an aspect of a universal consciousness, Self, Being, Mind, or God. The awakening to this true nature, claimed a Zen master, is "the direct awareness that you are more than this puny body or limited mind. Stated negatively, it is the realization that the universe is not external to you. Positively, it is experiencing the universe as yourself" (Kapleau, 1965). A different description can be found in almost any culture. Typical is the claim by an Englishman that to realize our true identity is to "find that the I, one's real, most intimate self, pervades the universe and all other beings. That the mountains, and the sea, and the stars are a part of one's body, and that one's soul is in touch with the souls of all creatures" (Harman, 1979). Nor are such descriptions the exclusive province of mystics. They have been echoed by philosophers, psychologists, and physicists (Wilber, 1984). "Out of my experience . . . one final conclusion dogmatically emerges," said the great American philosopher William James (1960). "There is a continuum of cosmic consciousness against which our individuality builds but accidental forces, and into which our several minds plunge as into a mother sea."

From this perspective, evolution is a vast journey of growing self-awareness and a return to our true identity (Wilber, 1981). Our current crises are seen as expressions of the mistaken desires, fears, and perceptions that arise from our mistaken identity. But they can also be seen as self-created challenges that may speed us on our evolutionary journey toward ultimate self-recognition.

Which worldview is correct? Are we solely survival-driven animals or are we also awakening gods? How can we decide? Both worldviews give answers which are similar and different: similar in that they both tell us to research and explore, different in the emphasis of our exploration. The worldview of materialism says to explore the physical

universe and thereby ourselves; the perennial philosophy says to explore our own minds and consciousness and thereby the universe.

In practical terms, it is crucial that we do both. Our survival and our evolution require that we deepen our understanding of both the universe within and the universe without (Walsh, 1984). We are challenged to choose and create our destiny. That challenge demands that we relinquish our former limits and be and become and contribute all that we can. It calls on us to play our full part in the unfolding human drama that we ourselves have created and asks that we choose, both individually and collectively, something entirely new: conscious evolution.

In conclusion, hard material necessity and human evolutionary possibility now seem to converge to create a situation where, in the long run, we will be obliged to do no less than realize our greatest possibilities. We are engaged in a race between self-discovery and self-destruction. The forces that may converge to destroy us are the same forces that may foster societal and self-discovery. (Elgin, 1980)

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