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When to Read a Heavy Tome

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In July 2018, I sat down to begin reading a mammoth book. It was not an appealing format, with tiny print packed into each page. Furthermore, the author had told me that the book, published in 2005, had received only two reviews. So I was gambling that the effort to carefully read the book would be worthwhile.

The topic grabbed me: evil. This wasn't a religious treatment but rather a scholarly search for what is behind the worst aspects of human behaviour. The title: *The Pathology of Man: A Study of Human Evil*. The author: Steven James Bartlett. More about him later.

The word "Man" in the title refers to the human species, but this usage has become uncommon with the emphasis on non-sexist language. It was not a good start, but I let it pass. Males of the species are responsible for most evil deeds, so perhaps the title was more appropriate than I thought.

The book presents ideas in a systematic, careful fashion. Bartlett starts out examining ideas about disease, with "disease" used in a medical rather than a metaphorical sense. On reading this treatment, I realised that, like most others, I do not think deeply about the nature of disease. In very general terms, it refers to some problem with an organism's functioning, something that restricts its usual capacities. Bartlett says that calling something a disease is always a value judgement, in relation to current social values. I learned that several early writers saw anti-Semitism and racism as diseases.

Eventually Bartlett defines mental disease, or pathology, in terms of harms. If an individual is seriously harmed by a feature of mental processing, in the sense of being prevented from achieving desired goals, then the cause can be called a mental pathology. Remembering the title, *The Pathology of Man*, you can see where this is going. Bartlett carefully goes through standard views about pathology and then applies them to the human species.

It is striking how powerful this approach can be. You might say, why didn't anyone think of this before? Well, some people have, and Bartlett looks at prominent figures, and some less well known, who pursued the same lines of thought.

I thought of an immediate objection to the idea that humans, as a species, could be diseased: surely not everyone is subject to the same pathology. On reflection, this is not a rebuttal. If someone has cancer, they are diseased, but not every cell is cancerous.

What about evil? Bartlett is connecting a pathology of humans to evil, a term that is usually associated with religious belief. Bartlett, though, adopts a strictly secular conception, defining evil as "apparently voluntary destructive behavior and attitudes that result in the general negation of health, happiness, and ultimately of life." This is a bit vague, so examples are helpful.

This is where the book became much more interesting for me. Manifestations of evil include genocide, war and ecological destruction, all of which I've studied. So can Bartlett say anything new using his framework?

Steven Bartlett

Bartlett was born in 1945 in Mexico City. As an only child, he grew up going back and forth between the US and Mexico. He provides this image from his childhood.

The distant tap-tapping of two typewriters and softly playing classical music were the sounds that put me to sleep each night. Both my father and mother were hard at work — my mother, typing her poetry and her always diligent literary correspondence, and my father, creating entrances into the minds of the characters described in his fiction and non-fiction. The sound of words as they were struck onto paper possessed a rhythm punctuated now and again by a faint bell as each typewriter's carriage reached the end of a line (Bartlett 2021, 9).

Bartlett's father regularly took the family to Mexico for his studies of haciendas, while his mother held the family together financially. With this sort of intellectual upbringing, perhaps it's not surprising that Steven was a star student, advancing rapidly and then taking jobs at a succession of universities and research institutions in the US and Europe. In 1984, at the age of only 39, he retired from university teaching, leaving his tenured professorship to devote full-time to research and writing. He obtained honorary faculty appointments at Oregon State University and Willamette University.

I learned that earlier in his life, he and his wife had run a business producing handmade musical instruments from the baroque era. Not too surprisingly, they each played instruments themselves. Living remotely means that Steven spends a lot of time addressing problems with their house and property. After massive rains, he had to clear the driveway from fallen trees.

Steven and I have never met, not even online or by phone. We correspond by email, finding areas of common interest and delicately touching on areas of disagreement. I learned that he and his wife live in rural Oregon, remote from population centres. This distance from the madding crowd gives him psychological space for undertaking massive projects, the sorts that are unusual among academics who, to get ahead, usually prioritise articles in journals with just enough originality to show respect for the reigning paradigm while not going so far outside it to be dismissed as an eccentric or worse. Somewhere along the line, Steven decided to forge a different path, breaking with the usual approaches, by spending enormous efforts on long-term projects.

By training, Steven is a philosopher and psychologist. This does little to explain why he was willing to spend a decade of his life investigating human evil, reading classic works by the likes of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and Lewis Fry Richardson, and studying some of the world's evil deeds for evidence of psychological deviance.

Today there is often an intense interest in the personal lives of creators, especially prominent ones. Richard Schickel (1985) wrote about how celebrity culture emerged in the twentieth century, especially through movies, and began to pervade art and politics. He noted that knowing about artists and the dollar value of their works substitutes for an assessment of

their artwork. Similarly, when judging a major scholarly output, some deem it important to examine the author's biography, or at least their institutional affiliation. In many cases, knowing about an author can bring insight into what they have accomplished, but there is a limit to this, and furthermore probing into personal details can even distract from what they have produced.

Having known hundreds of scholars over my career, I am compelled to conclude that knowing someone, and knowing their life history, often gives little insight into what they have produced. This was most obvious to me when I worked in a mathematics department. It was almost impossible to connect the personalities of colleagues with their research interests or outputs. But perhaps making connections between life trajectories and works produced is more relevant in human sciences, like psychology and communication studies. Then I thought about examples of scholars whose behaviour was not in accordance with their writings, including ones with "feet of clay" who espoused high ideals but as people were arrogant, self-seeking or sexual harassers (Martin 1998, 164–171).

So when I set out to write about some of my experiences with Steven and his ideas, I was caught in a curious dilemma. In cultural life today, especially with social media, the personal life of a creator has become an important part of the reception to their work, so I'd like to tell about Steven the person to encourage readers to take a greater interest in his contributions. But on the other hand, I'm not convinced that telling you about Steven the person really says very much about his ideas, which deserve to be assessed on their merits, on their insights.

What I'll say is that he is willing to tackle topics that others might shy away from. One that struck me is his analysis of human stupidity. Yes, stupidity! It requires intellectual bravery to accuse the bulk of humans of being stupid, because this implies being superior. (What writer would admit to being stupid?) And claiming or even suggesting being superior is a big no-no in today's society — at least in academic circles — despite the number of narcissists in positions of authority.

Evil and Psychological Normality

This brings me back to *The Pathology of Man*, and I'll revert to referring to Bartlett rather than Steven, as I'm talking about his ideas. He writes about human evil, with detailed expositions of toxic human behaviour in genocide, war and ecological destruction. An obvious rebuttal is to say these social problems are due to a small subset of people and are not a reflection on the species. A minority of people have serious personality disorders. Most relevant here is the so-called dark triad of narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy. Surely most of the perpetrators of bad things must have a personality disorder, especially one of these.

Bartlett says, no, actually most perpetrators are psychologically normal. That means they are ordinary people who, in certain circumstances, do terrible things. One of the chapters in *The Pathology of Man* is on genocide generally, and another specifically on the Holocaust, the genocide of Jews and others carried out by the Nazis in 1941–1945. Bartlett combed through sources about the psychological characteristics of those directly responsible for the

Holocaust, including Nazi leaders and the men directly involved in killing operations. Sure, a few were psychopaths, but apparently no more than in the general population. Most of them were normal, as judged by standards of the day.

You might say, anyone willing to shoot defenceless men, women and children couldn't be psychologically normal. But that is exactly what Bartlett is saying, and he musters numerous examples and experts. See also Bartlett (2011).

However, there were a few Germans who behaved unusually at the time and who might be thought to be mentally deviant. These were the ones who openly resisted the genocide.

When I was most active in the peace movement, in the 1980s, I helped organise rallies on Hiroshima Day. Initially, it was a struggle to get people to attend, but then came the huge mobilisation against nuclear war that swept across the world. But a few years later, the movement went into decline and by the 1990s it was dormant. Again, getting people interested in taking action for peace became extremely difficult.

In his chapter on war, Bartlett makes a striking point: most people do not want to be involved in efforts to end war. This rang true. The number of people pushing for disarmament is quite small. The majority support or tolerate military establishments. They might be against particular wars or weapons but that's all. So here again, in an everyday observation, is support for Bartlett's idea that the human species is subject to a pathology. Humans are diseased. We are diseased.

The pathology of the human species manifests itself in thought and behaviour in sufficient numbers of individuals to cause serious damage to the species itself. This is most obvious in ecological destruction. Humans, most of whom are psychologically normal, through their keenness to procreate, acquire material possessions and join in the imperative for economic growth, are contributing to the destruction of the supports for human life. Some individuals have pushed against this, joining environmental campaigns, but they are a minority, with few resources compared to the governments, corporations and avid consumers driving the problem.

No Hope?

There is much more to *The Pathology of Man*, but one thing is missing: hope. Most books about social problems, after chapters recounting what's wrong, end with a gesture towards what to do. Bartlett, in contrast, did not want to give readers false hope, instead preferring to emphasise the seriousness of the fundamental problems, thinking that until people realised this, it was misleading to look for hopeful signs. This was a challenge for me because of my special interest in tactics against injustice and, more generally, grassroots strategies for social change.

I decided to write some articles about the relevance of Bartlett's ideas for domains with which I was familiar. Having spent the time to carefully read *The Pathology of Man* and take pages and pages of notes, I felt prepared to be able to say something of interest, and furthermore to give the book some of the attention I think it deserves. I started with a short article about evil and whistleblowing, not hard to write given my years of talking with

whistleblowers. Then I moved onto other topics, finishing with a treatment of “evil institutions,” applying Bartlett’s psychological ideas to social institutions like the military (Martin 2021).

Writing these articles was an excellent way to develop and fine-tune my understanding of Bartlett’s ideas, and I had something more to help me: Steven was willing to read drafts and gently guide me through misunderstandings and omissions.

Steven and I seem to have benefited from our connection, but there was nothing preordained about us meeting each other. Having never previously been in touch, Steven emailed me in 2017, initially concerning writing about peer review. I replied and we exchanged long emails periodically, finding additional areas of shared interest, including open-access publishing and suppression of dissent. After I told him about coming under attack online by pro-vaccination campaigners, Steven told me about his work on the psychological gratifications of hatred, and offered to send me *The Pathology of Man*. After I started reading the book, I told Steven that I might write something about it. This exchange was old-school: long letters, relatively infrequent and carefully expressed, something less and less common in the Internet era.

After finishing *The Pathology of Man*, Bartlett wrote a follow-up book focusing on the problems, indeed dangers, of relying on psychological normality as a criterion for mental health. This is apparent in the title of the book: *Normality Does Not Equal Mental Health: The Need to Look Elsewhere for Standards of Good Mental Health* (2011).

His next giant project, based on a decade of work, was a book of philosophy titled *Critique of Impure Reason*, an obvious take on Immanuel Kant’s famous *Critique of Pure Reason*. In his massive tome, Bartlett (2021b) argues that philosophers and others uncritically rely on concepts for which there is no foundation. This is not my field and I haven’t tried to tackle the book, but have exchanged ideas with Steven about promoting it. You see, he has had an extremely difficult time trying to find anyone to review the book. Several journal editors told him they couldn’t find reviewers due to the book’s 900 pages of small print. With my encouragement, he personally contacted several philosophers, with slim returns. But after considerable efforts, a few are now expressing interest.

To make his ideas more accessible, Steven wrote a primer explaining the contents of the book in the length of an article (Bartlett 2021c). The implications seem important, but what can be done to encourage experts in the field to spend the time and effort to digest such a mammoth work?

In an attempt to increase readership, Steven made the book free online. It is also available for sale in hard copy, but who will buy it except libraries? At one point, just two libraries had purchased copies: Harvard University and the University of Wollongong. Of course I had ordered it. Then came a curious matter. A correspondent of Steven’s told him the Harvard copy was missing from the library, and I received an email from the University of Wollongong library saying the book had arrived but was missing from the shelves. It almost seemed like something devious was going on. Later the copy I had ordered showed up and I

grasped the tome, which weighs in at 1.3 kilograms (two pounds). Since then, several more universities have acquired copies.

Because some of my research is about dissident ideas, I am occasionally contacted by scholars who have worked away for years on a personal project and have difficulty finding anyone willing to examine their work seriously. This is especially common in the physical sciences, in challenges to relativity and quantum theory, but also occurs in the humanities and social sciences.

A scholar trying to survive and get ahead in the academic game must concentrate on their research, getting results and publications without too much delay. Publication metrics abound and they do not reward spending a decade on a single work, especially one that does not make a giant splash. So perhaps it is not surprising that it was so hard to find reviewers of Steven's epic books. When one's own research needs to be the top priority, there is little career benefit in carefully reading someone else's lengthy work, only to benefit them.

Is the neglect of *The Pathology of Man* and *Critique of Impure Reason* anything to worry about? Is it possibly a feature of the very pathologies they analyse?

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