



<http://social-epistemology.com>  
ISSN: 2471-9560

The Human Refusal to Look in the Mirror

Steven James Bartlett, Willamette University, [sbartlet@willamette.edu](mailto:sbartlet@willamette.edu)

---

Bartlett, Steven James. 2022. "The Human Refusal to Look in the Mirror." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 11 (9): 46-55. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-7bm>.

Professor Brian Martin of the University of Wollongong has published a series of insightful and articulate papers and books (Martin 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2020, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b) that offer commentaries on my book *The Pathology of Man* (Bartlett 2005), a study of the psychology of human aggression and destructiveness. In these publications, Martin proceeds, in a variety of creative and suggestive ways, to apply and extend some of the conclusions reached in my book to a wide range of major problems confronting humanity.

Martin is what I would call an enlightened social activist. By this I mean he succeeds in rising above the often purely emotion-driven idealism of social activists, and makes a successful effort to understand by means of carefully thought out analyses both some of the major obstacles that activism faces and effective ways of reaching specific activist goals. In other words, he is reflective, analytical, and dispassionate.

This paper is written in response to Martin’s recent paper “When to Read a Heavy Tome” (Martin 2022a) which describes and comments on *The Pathology of Man*, related books by me, and my personal life.

I should like to begin with an expression of warm thanks to Brian for his sustained and generous interest in my work, and for the special variety of intelligence which he has brought to bear on it. A portion of the present paper focuses briefly on that specific variety of intelligence, a form of intelligence which unfortunately is comparatively rare among members of our species, even among those of us in higher education who might be expected to excel when it comes to matters of intelligence.

My professional interests for more than half a century have focused on epistemological skills and psychological competencies that are of a specialized but important variety: These are skills and competences that seldom are given the attention due them by mainstream epistemology and cognitive science.

In a short paper of this kind, I cannot of course provide a full account of these skills and competencies, so instead I will take the occasion to collect together, I hope accurately and in a spirit of high regard, a few “meta-observations” about Brian Martin’s mind and psychology as I have come to perceive these in Martin’s publications that relate to my work. These observations are cognitively and psychologically descriptive, and I briefly list them to illustrate in broad terms so that readers may acquire an intuitive sense for some of the central epistemological skills and psychological competencies that have concerned me for many years.<sup>1</sup>

Foremost among Martin’s skills and competencies are, I think, these:

- A willingness coupled with a strong motivation to “think outside the box”;

---

<sup>1</sup> For the detailed development of the concept of *epistemological intelligence*, see Bartlett (2017c). This monograph was later revised and extended, and appears as Appendix II in Bartlett (2021).

- A reflective self-conscious recognition of the value of doing this;
- An ability to make original connections among patterns of thought, habitual constructs and paradigms, and sets of concepts that we tend to use uncritically and without reflection;
- The ability to think reflectively and analytically about those very ways of thinking, paradigms, and concepts that have become second-nature;
- An ability to disengage, both conceptually and emotionally, from preferred prevailing beliefs, prejudices, fashions, and biases which very often *influence and indeed mold* both the content and direction of our research interests, and, at least equally importantly, which function to *exclude* from our interests and concerns what we do not *wish* to think about due to the force we allow our prevailing beliefs to exercise upon us.

Martin ends his paper (Martin 2022a) with a question. In his essay, he comments on the sparse reception of my study, Bartlett (2005), and of my most recent book, Bartlett (2021). He asks, “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?”

With a life-long strong interest in epistemological skills and psychological competencies such as the ones I’ve mentioned above, I have had almost two decades since the publication of *The Pathology of Man* to reach an answer to this question. I think I’ve answered it, and in the body of this paper will attempt to share with readers a set of both epistemological and psychological realizations whose importance extends far beyond an adequate explanation for the neglect of merely two individual books.

### **The Refusal to Question One’s Preferred Beliefs about the Human Species**

Let us turn to look at what happens when the cognitive and psychological skills and capacities that I’ve just mentioned are absent. In particular, suppose we focus on the limitations that come about when people who do not have those skills and competences engage in policy- and decision-making that affect entire groups of people, policies and decisions that often have to do with the very place and the role of the human species on our planet. When people don’t possess these skills and competences, we find that they frequently have these characteristics:

- An unwillingness to apply to the human species concepts and ways of thinking which human beings have developed *exclusively* to describe and evaluate *non-human* species—whether these are organisms that harm or impede human interests, or cause human diseases, or are simply members of the general classes of plants and non-human animals;
- A rejection or repudiation of the value of applying such exclusively extra-human concepts to our own species;

- An inability to make connections that depart from mainstream preferred beliefs, prejudices, fashions, etc. that emphasize and advocate the priority of our species over all others;
- A deeply rooted unwillingness to disengage from homocentric beliefs, prejudices, and priorities.

We'll look more closely at these cognitive/psychological characteristics in a moment.

### **Some Personal Reflections**

Martin's recent paper "When to Read a Heavy Tome" takes a step that we seldom see in our standard one-dimensional and often rather stuffy academic publications: He includes in his essay brief descriptions that relate to an author's personal life. This was an effort, I think, to provide a human-interest context within which to situate and perhaps thereby understand better how the work of an individual author (in this case, me) developed intellectually in relation to that lived context.

Martin's inclusion of this more personal level may, I hope, give me permission here to share with readers some of my own experiences that may highlight and perhaps help to provide more substance and meaning to the short bulleted list of human shortcomings given in the previous section.

As a child I was intellectually advanced for my age, with interests and reasoning skills formed early that usually develop later, if at all. But I found out quickly that "being different" in these respects (at least in U.S. schools, though interestingly not in Mexico) brought a decided disadvantage: anti-intellectual discrimination in the form of bullying. This antagonistic response followed me through much of my schooling, even recurring, albeit in a different form, on the graduate level (see Bartlett 2017a). This succession of experiences gave me reason to try to make sense of my fellow human beings' psychology that was revealed when many people encounter differences which, in their own minds, challenge their sense of comparative self-worth and self-esteem.

Let me now fast-forward to the decade during which I researched and wrote *The Pathology of Man* (Bartlett 2005). Occasionally, I mentioned that work in progress to friends and colleagues, and eventually submitted proposals of the book to publishers. As soon as the subject-matter of the book became only marginally clear to friends, colleagues, or publishers, many (and here I mean the majority) very quickly, even automatically it seemed, *recoiled* from any effort—made by me, or by *anyone*—to assemble evidence that would place the human species in a negative, critical light. The "recoil" that I perceived was, and I cannot emphasize this enough, so nearly automatic, so nearly instantaneous, that it was evident that the reaction was elicited very much like a reflex jerk of the lower leg when a knee is hit in the right place by a doctor's rubber mallet. Of course, not every friend, colleague, or, fortunately, publisher reacted this way. However, most did.

I came to two conclusions, both firmly “evidence-based” in the experiential content of years of replicated experiences:

First, I found *an emotional reflex in a great many people that blinds the individual person to evidence that would discredit what he or she prefers to believe*: This emotional reflex took the form of annoyance, exasperation, abhorrence, revulsion, and even anger, sparking virtually instantaneous disagreement, opposition, and the desire to make the contrary case, while refusing to listen to evidence the individual simply does not *want* to hear, and *refuses* to hear. —Bear in mind, these are reactions upon hearing of a work *still in progress*, one that would attempt to bring together empirical evidence of many of the psychological shortcomings that lead people to aggression and destructiveness, in a great many of its manifestations, from war, to terrorism, individual violence, obedience to authority, anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, racial hatred, environmental pollution and ecological destructiveness, and more.

Second, I found clear evidence of *conceptual and cognitive limitations in the form of blinders*: These are blinders to what we don’t want to acknowledge, even to become conscious of, and do not *want*, or even are *willing*, to see beyond.

### **One-Way Concepts**

I’ll call a concept a ‘*one-way concept*’ when we accept the legitimacy of its application to non-human objects of reference, but refuse to permit such concepts to be applied both ways, “in reverse,” to the human species, as well. Many of the concepts that we have developed to name other organisms that we do not like, or that interfere with our goals, or that hurt us, or that cause us to fear them, are one-way concepts. They tend to be concepts that carry with them an implicit or explicit negative judgment. They function in our everyday and even in our technical vocabularies as discriminatory, carrying with them strong rejection, identifying those to which these evaluative concepts are applied as contrary to human interests and therefore as our adversaries.

One-way concepts of this kind include the concepts of pathogen, disease, parasitism, predation, and others. We have accustomed ourselves to this restricted one-way usage, for the most part uncritically, without giving thought to the prevailing conformity of the majority of people, including specialists in the relevant disciplines, to the emotionally enforced one-way application of these concepts.

There is a related group of similar, but yet different, concepts that also fall into the exclusionist category of one-way concepts. The concept of *psychological normality* is one of these. It is a concept that has come—again, in a largely uncritical way, and not based on evidence—to be accepted as one of the principal arbiters, one of the central standards, of good psychological health. The implicit, hidden assumption that the concept of psychological normality can legitimately be used *only* in a favorable way, that is, to characterize good psychological functioning, is laid bare once we question whether psychologically normal people may, in fact and not merely in theory, possess psychological dispositions that lead them, when circumstances are right, to engage in aggression and destructiveness that cause great harm to other people, to other organisms, to the global environment, and often to themselves.

Similarly, the implicit presumption that the concepts of pathogen, disease, parasitism, predation, etc., must be reserved only for extra-human application is laid bare once we question whether the human species itself may function as a real, non-metaphorical, pathogen: whether the species (in reality, and not in an illusory world that we would prefer to exist) functions as a global pathogen, exactly as an invasive disease-causing pathogen overwhelms and destroys a culture of healthy liver cells in a Petri dish.

To suggest such a two-way use of exclusionary one-way concepts brings, I think, to a great many people, an immediate and reflex sense of distaste, rejection, avoidance, perhaps condemnation, and very likely dismissal and the desire to move on to other topics that are more in line with what they “prefer to believe,” what is more in keeping with their established conventionally-agreed-upon tastes, preferences, accepted priorities, and human wishes.

To carry this a few lines longer: The human species, in reality, as I’ve tried to show in Bartlett (2005; 2006), does act precisely as a parasite species, and in particular as an *invasive parasite species*, but our species does this *on a global scale*, both killing and frequently rendering extinct many hundreds of thousands of non-human species, both plant and animal, and in the process wiping out their habitats and resources. In short,

Mankind has become a world-devouring species, or, to use an appropriate term that has now become rare, it has become pantophagous, consuming all that it is capable of, ravaging the resources of its host [this planet] with true parasite rapacity. The human species has developed a capacity and a will to devour an exhaustively wide array of resources. When one resource is depleted, human beings find ways to satisfy their needs by means of an alternative resource, which they then exploit (Bartlett 2005, 264).

If we were widely and publicly to apply the terms of pathogenicity, parasitism, predation, and species invasion as I have here to the human species, we will elicit on the part of very many people reflex reactions of irritation, distaste, disagreement, and rejection.

To add somewhat to the picture of our species that I have briefly sketched, let us take the following phrase (used I think unconsciously only in its exclusionist one-way sense by ecologically enlightened Richard Attenborough) and give it two-way application: Lord Attenborough often, and with strong scientific justification, condemns industrial farming that produces “a stifling monoculture” that not only excludes other plants, but undermines the habitats and conditions of life of a wide diversity of species, with the ultimate potential of self-referentially also including the destruction of habitats and conditions of life necessary for the human species.

But let us look beyond industrial farming: Today the human species itself has come to comprise a *global monoculture*, bringing with it the same destructive consequences of any widespread crop monoculture. What is more, the human monoculture combines at once the properties of being highly parasitic, predatory, and invasive.

There is a good deal more that can—legitimately, based on strong and conclusive empirical evidence—be claimed about the place and role of the human species in relation to other species, and in relation to global ecology and climate. Here, my purpose is limited to directing attention to the *reflex response*, repeatedly made evident to me in the nearly instantaneous reactions I have witnessed in reactions to the very briefest of descriptions of the evidence-based purpose of my book, *The Pathology of Man*.

Martin's question, whether the neglect of *The Pathology of Man* as well as my most recent book, *Critique of Impure Reason*, may reflect the very pathologies they analyze, expresses, I think, an astute and intuitive recognition of much that I've tried to convey in these short paragraphs. Let us try to understand this recognition analytically and in more detail.

### **Misanthropy or Science?**

“Misanthropy” is commonly thought of as a dislike, even hatred, of humanity, or as antisocial behavior, or as cynical distrust of other people. A person may weary of and come to dislike the repetitive use by film makers of the primitive sound of the beating of drums to excite an audience during perilous action scenes; in much the same way, misanthropy is usually a similar, individual emotionally driven aversion: For the most part, it is purely a matter of taste, a preference, an emotional reaction of displeasure. It may, however, also sometimes comprise a dislike that has come about as a result of that individual's personal frustrating or hurtful experiences. But seldom is the negative judgment it entails the result of scientific study.

Misanthropy as an emotionally based bias has no place of course in a scientific assessment of human aggression and destructiveness, but the two are often confounded by many people, as I've seen in reflex responses to my research. Examples can be found among some of my friends, colleagues, and prospective publishers who were unwilling even to contemplate the possibility, to mention but one example, that psychologically normal people, under the right circumstances, will act out dispositions to think and behave in highly destructive, cruel, or murderous ways, and in the process receive deeply felt gratifications that ensure the continuation of the same patterns of thought and behavior. The immediate reaction to such a notion has often been that it is a blatant expression of objectionable misanthropy. Here we find another instance of the reflex aversion to consider evidence of human pathology. It is also an expression of unwavering and stubborn species pride.

Human species pride itself can very often erect obstacles to clear, dispassionate, objective, evidence-based science that studies human shortcomings.

One area critically affected by human species pride relates to animal rights. There, the homocentric one-way, established restriction of terms such as ‘sentience’, ‘empathy and compassion’, ‘altruistic behavior’, ‘consciousness of self’, ‘awareness of death’, and ‘legal personhood’, all of which have traditionally been reserved exclusively for application to human beings, has begun to come under reflective and critical scrutiny (see, e.g., Bartlett 2002).

Despite a few very small signs of change of this kind, I have found in a long personal and professional experience that the majority of peer reviewers and potential readers and

reviewers of those books that propose and defend negative assessments of the human species are people who wince or are repulsed by the very notion that the human species may be afflicted by destructive, harmful pathologies. A book like *The Pathology of Man* is not merely neglected, as Martin recognized, it is *systematically avoided* because it conflicts with what many people *like to believe*.

Much in parallel, in the case of a book such as my recent *Critique of Impure Reason*, there are many professional philosophers and students of philosophy (to whom the book is largely addressed) who cannot *abide* the notion that the great majority of philosophical questions that have occupied philosophers for millennia can in fact be shown to be “*conceptually pathological*,” which is to say, questions that, in diverse ways, undermine their own *possible* meaning. Philosophers, like members of any discipline, defend vested self-interests in preserving their discipline, and the discipline of philosophy has traditionally defined itself largely in terms of these very self-undermining questions.

This, I submit, is the answer to the question Martin left us with at the end of his paper. Beyond the modest question why two individual books have been left to one side is the significantly more important question why members of the human species refuse to look in the mirror, and rather than look, will resort to whatever tactics of evasion, opposition, or dismissal present themselves that give them pretexts to avoid looking. As we have seen throughout human history, theories and empirical results that conflict with preferred beliefs are either dismissed, condemned, or simply neglected and thereby silenced (often along with the researchers themselves).

If the conclusion reached in this paper is true, it is a tragedy and an irony that humanity systematically avoids the very recognition of the most fundamental reasons for the critical problems it faces, and thereby denies the human species the possibility of discovering effective ways to cope with and treat its most basic pathologies.

As long as the reflex pattern of avoidance I have described continues, there can be little hope to remedy humanity’s most destructive shortcomings.

Here, it is appropriate to end this short essay with reflections on hope.

### **The Pathology of Hope**

Martin mentions the way human hope is analyzed and then discarded in *The Pathology of Man*. He comments that I did not want to leave readers with false hope that we shall be able to overcome the wide range of human pathologies for which the book provides evidence. This is true: I didn’t want to communicate false hope. But my motivation was more than this:

Hope has most often served humanity as both a crutch and a blinder: as a crutch when people simply possess no adequate solutions to the most pressing human-caused problems, and as a blinder to that discouraging fact. Understood in this way, hope itself functions as a pathology, as a causative agent of harm, since it deceptively insulates us from self-knowledge that could help us first to understand, and then potentially to treat the very pathologies



which have caused and continue to cause humanity, other species, and the global environment so much avoidable loss and destruction.

For these reasons—certainly to spare readers illusory hope, but more importantly to recognize hope as it functions in promoting the very pathologies that harm us, giving us illusions that we may continue on our present course undeterred—*The Pathology of Man* does not end on a note of optimism. Optimism, as we know, sells because it caters to what people *prefer* to believe and *want* to believe. We should anticipate, as the author himself did, that a critical assessment of human hope that shows it to be in many ways destructive, is not likely to sell.

How then might our psychologically most fundamental and most destructive pathologies be treated? What could, conceivably and yet realistically, bring our species effective treatment for its deeply rooted pathologies? What conceivable, realistic hope is possible?

Here, let me use, but only as a metaphor, the initial and central goal of the method advocated by Alcoholics Anonymous: It is a method that first requires an alcoholic to *admit* his or her problem, to *own* that problem by recognizing the effects of the alcoholic's behavior on himself or herself as well as others, and *only then* to work to correct these things. (During this process, AA's method appeals to a so-called 'higher power', which will play no part in my metaphor.) AA's method is in keeping with the general theory of problem solving: To solve a problem, one must first *recognize* it and *accept* it for what it is; only then can effective solutions be forthcoming.

In the following science fiction portrayal of hope for humanity, an analogous first step requires that we *recognize* and *own* humanity's deeply rooted psychological pathologies. Any recognition must of course occur in the form of recognition experienced on the individual level, by individual researchers and by individual everyday people. In this science fiction daydream, the first step individuals would need to take is to acknowledge the following:

- “I am a member of a species, the majority of whose members possess a psychological constitution that predisposes them—when circumstances are right, which they often are—to engage in patterns of thought and behavior that are harmful, not only to other people, but to other species, the environment, and often even to me.”
- “I am an organism that typically has the blind urge to reproduce itself without heed for the ‘larger picture’. That larger picture must take into account the welfare of biodiversity and of climate stability, along with such pressing issues as population overcrowding, traffic, longer lines, medical care, resource scarcity, pollution, the loss of aesthetically nourishing natural environments, and the resulting potential for a generally decreasing quality of life. All of these are affected by whether I choose to have children, or expect and encourage others to have them.”
- “As a typical member of my species, I am very largely controlled by my own psychological needs to ‘fit in’, to conform in how I think and behave, and to accept the preferred beliefs of the group or groups I identify with.”

- “I have an automatic, reflex disposition to dismiss, oppose, repudiate, or silence efforts to question and challenge what I prefer to believe.”

(Keep in mind that this list of self-acknowledgments is considerably abbreviated.)

As in the case of a recovering alcoholic, only when a first step like this is made would it be possible, in the unlikely and fictitious story I’ve described, for humanity to make a first, rationally hopeful, step in overcoming its own pathologies.

Beyond this first step, there are other, and to be sure, equally and even more unlikely, possible ways that could conceivably inspire rational hope: All are extreme, highly improbable, and likely to remain, I think, in the realm of science fiction:

They include genetic engineering implemented on a world-wide scale so as to provide infants with a modified genetic constitution that fosters the development of what I have called “*moral intelligence*” (see Bartlett 2002 and 2005, Chapter 18); the development of pharmacological treatment to suppress and perhaps over time permanently cure human pathologies, a suggestion made in different clothing many years ago by Arthur Koestler (Koestler 1967, 336-337);<sup>2</sup> a world-wide recognition and acceptance that human beings cannot be entrusted with their own government because members of the species are cognitively and psychologically incompetent to do this, and that therefore government by artificial intelligence provides the only plausible solution (see, e.g., Bartlett 2016); or, what is likely for most people to be the most palatable possibility (although I consider it to be the least likely of success): to develop a method of education that can effectively transform the psychological constitution of all students who share the typical, deeply rooted psychological constitution that has characterized the human species throughout human history, thereby changing on the level of each individual student the set of *normal human predispositions* in ways that reduce and eliminate the pathologies of the species.

I do not take any of these proposals seriously because they are patently extreme, improbable, and/or simply unimplementable.

These, in short, are the reasons why hope has had no role to play in *The Pathology of Man* or in my related publications since then.

## **Acknowledgments**

My thanks to Brian Martin for his sustained and intelligent interest in my work and for his suggestions.

---

<sup>2</sup> Koestler did not like this solution, but it was the only one he believed was plausible: “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.” (Koestler (1967, 338); for discussion, see Bartlett (2008).)

## References

- Bartlett, Steven James. 2021. *Critique of Impure Reason: Horizons of Possibility and Meaning*. Salem, OR: Studies in Theory and Behavior.
- Bartlett, Steven James. 2017a. "Encounters with Intellectual Suppression." Available from <http://www.bmartin.cc/dissent/documents/Bartlett17.pdf>.
- Bartlett, Steven James. 2017b. "The Case for Government by Artificial Intelligence." SSRN. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3089920](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3089920).
- Bartlett, Steven James. 2017c. *Epistemological Intelligence*. Centre pour la Communication Scientifique Directe: HAL, <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01429159>. Revised and extended in Bartlett (2021, Appendix II).
- Bartlett, Steven James. 2016. "The Case for Government by Artificial Intelligence." SSRN. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3089920](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3089920).
- Bartlett, Steven James. 2011. *Normality Does Not Equal Mental Health: The Need to Look Elsewhere for Standards of Good Psychological Health*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.
- Bartlett, Steven James. 2008. "The Humanistic Psychology of Human Evil: Ernest Becker and Arthur Koestler." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 48 (Jan. 30): 340-363.
- Bartlett, Steven James. 2006. "The Ecological Pathology of Man." *Mentalities/Mentalités: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 20 (2): 1-18. Also available [online](#).
- Bartlett, Steven James. 2005. *The Pathology of Man: A Study of Human Evil*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
- Bartlett, Steven James. 2002. "Roots of Human Resistance to Animal Rights: Psychological and Conceptual Blocks." *Animal Law* 8: 143-176. Electronically re-published 2002 by Michigan State University's Detroit College of Law, [Animal Law Web Center](#). Translated and published online in [German](#), and then published in Portuguese translation, Steven James Bartlett, "Raízes da Resistência Humana aos Direitos dos Animais: Bloqueios Psicológicos e Conceituais." *Brazilian Animal Rights Review (Revista Brasileira de Direito Animal)* 2 (3), July/December, 2007: 17-66. Available [online](#).
- Martin, Brian. 2022a. "[When to Read a Heavy Tome](#)." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 11 (8): 84-89.
- Martin, Brian. 2022b. *Persistent Panics: The Wars on Drugs, Crime, Terrorism and War*. Sparsnäs, Sweden: Irene Publishing. Also available [online](#).
- Martin, Brian. 2021a. "[Evil Institutions: Steven Bartlett's Analysis of Human Evil and Its Relevance for Anarchist Alternatives](#)." *Anarchist Studies* 29 (1): 88-110.
- Martin, Brian. 2021b. "[Humans: Reconciling Bad and Good?](#)" *Brian's Comments*, 22 January.
- Martin, Brian. 2020. "[Tactics against Scheming Diseases](#)." *Journal of Sociotechnical Critique* 1 (1): 1-20.
- Martin, Brian. 2019a. "[Technology and Evil](#)." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*. 8 (2): 1-14.
- Martin, Brian. 2019b. "[What if most People Love Violence?](#)" *Waging Nonviolence*, 3 May.
- Martin, Brian. 2018. "[Whistleblowers versus Evil](#)." *The Whistle* 96 (Oct.): 4-5. (Newsletter of Whistleblowers Australia).