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Alexander Klein

ON THE PITFALLS OF TRUTH BY ASSAULT

In deed and word Arthur Koestler has repeatedly proven that he is a talented, peculiarly sensitive, stubborn and courageous man. In his recent book, *Insight and Outlook,* he takes a long, dangerous leap from total involvement with the politics of the recent past and immediate present to total assault on ultimate truth: an attempt to create a comprehensive theory of ethics, aesthetics, science and civilization by way of "an inquiry into the common foundations of science, art and social ethics," as stated forthrightly by the book's subtitle. The results, I am sorry to report, are anything but happy, though by indirection and by its very errors the volume may conceivably prove seminal.

The archetype of the leftist intellectual who narrows down choices in every field to two startling dichotomies, accepting half-truth to achieve total contrast, Koestler also operates in terms of a basic moralistic bias. This, combined with his inadequate grounding in scientific method, has cruelly betrayed his good intentions. He is weighed down on his intellectual journey by an astonishing array of second hand scientific and psychological baggage (of which he feels particularly certain because he has accepted it on the authority of others), and he becomes so "en-

gaged” in particular arguments that he repeatedly tosses away crucial items or drops them when juggling becomes unfeasible, only to retrieve them hastily in altered form when the need arises.

A superb reporter and exciting fictional polemicist, Koestler has long been deeply involved in issues and ideas in the field of political morality and psychology. In The Gladiators (1939) and Darkness at Noon (1940) he expressed his disillusion with revolution as inevitably breeding tyranny, and rejected the single-track reasoning of ends serving as both necessary and sufficient justification of means. But Rubashov’s inability to embrace reason (at the end of Darkness at Noon) turned out an accurate transcription of Koestler’s own intellectual mood. For in Arrival and Departure (1949) Koestler’s hero explicitly rejects reason: discovering the neurotic basis of his revolutionary fervor, Peter does not reason himself into further idealism, but insists that one should not ask “because of what?”; one should only act from feeling. Reason, straw-mannishly represented by the analyst who cured Peter, is depicted as undercutting idealism and adjusting everyone to the status quo. Later, in Thieves In The Night (1946), Koestler deliberately set his hero, Joseph, in the spot on earth, Palestine, where the politics of terror (admittedly supported by a fervent sort of logic) would be most acceptable as basic strategy. Only a year earlier, incidentally, in The Yogi and The Commissar (1945), Koestler had explicitly discussed the necessity for a synthesis between the life of direct action aimed at change from without, and the life of contemplation directed at change from within, but insisted that of the two the latter extreme was preferable.

In the preface to that same volume of essays Koestler declared with commendable candor that he had never ceased to marvel each year at the foolhardiness of the ideas he championed the previous year. One might, therefore, have expected a measure of restraint in his new would-be scientific system. Instead, Koestler’s tone is dogmatic, even arrogant, his terminology irrespon-
sibly loose; and his penchant for scientific and psychological jargon has led him into an involved, solemnly pompous, murky style, a turgidity and unnecessary denseness typical of the prose which occasionally finds its way into some of our better journals because seeming impenetrability and novel nomenclature are confused with profundity. Moreover, Koestler alternates between overcriticalness and prolific use of unexamined assumptions, indulges in scores of digressions and inappropriate analogies and diagrams, commits countless logical fallacies, and sets up any number of straw men and crudely interpreted "opposition" notions which he then "demolishes" with both hatchet and scalpel.

Koestler begins with a 110-page analysis of the comic, intended to prove that "bisociation" and "self-assertiveness" or "aggressiveness" are the basic elements involved in all humor. For example, the fat notable whose vest buttons pop off is suddenly seen in the "bisociated" (conventionally unrelated) fields of (a) pompous dignitary and (b) vulnerable buffoon; and the spectators' "self-assertive, aggressive" tendencies cause them to laugh at his deflation. Now the two most frequently advanced theories of the comic have been incongruity (which implies two fields) and superiority (which involves self-assertion). Hence, despite the novel terminology, Koestler's theory of the comic is hardly original. And his insistence that all humor is self-assertive and aggressive does not stand inspection. Laughter at one's self, sympathetic laughter, genial humor hardly fit the theory without much distortion. Freud's "economized energy" theory, which does not arbitrarily assign a single emotional basis to humor, seems closer to the truth. In laughter we release excess energy, such as that generated in expectation of a serious situation which turns out otherwise, or the energy of pent-up malice. Laughing at a puppy's fall, for example, doesn't seem to involve aggression only but also identification (with the puppy) and release (from the need to worry about the fall and/or the neces-
sity of controlling oneself so as not to fall). In short, it would appear that in laughter as in most emotions aggressiveness is only one component. Another component might well be the so-called "self-transcending" or "integrative" tendency which Koestler sets up as the contradictory complement of "self-assertiveness." (The rebaptizing of these two well-known human tendencies—towards separateness and merging—adds nothing of significance.)

From the comic, *Insight and Outlook* goes on to "demonstrate" that crying is due to the frustrating of our "self-transcending" impulses, to our feeling of loneliness, unwantedness. Here Koestler chooses his examples to fit. His analysis completely overlooks the possibility that ego-denial (frustration of the "self-assertive" tendencies) may cause weeping. In short, as with laughing, the reduction of the phenomenon in every case to the same cause does not seem in harmony with the little knowledge we have of ourselves and others.

Koestler then proceeds to apply his basic principles ("self-assertive" and "self-transcendent" tendencies, and "bisociation") to organisms and societies, to ethics, science, and aesthetics. Art, scientific discovery, moral co-operative behavior—in short, the hope of the world—all stem from the "self-transcending" tendencies, with "bisociation" the common road to creative achievement in all fields. War, exploitation and world-doom are the end-products of the "self-assertive" or "aggressive" tendencies. The crisis in the Western world is due to the overemphasis of the latter; its redemption is contingent on re-establishment of the balance. None of this is strikingly new; in fact Koestler himself has said as much more than once. But there is a difference: in the current formulation it is implied that the "self-transcendent" tendency is the dominant one—in life and in matter itself. Hence, though Koestler holds out no hope for the immediate future, he feels that we are "evolutionally" fated to succeed in the long run.
In order to enjoy this long-range optimism, Koestler deems it essential to "refute" some Freudian concepts. His anti-Freudian bias, perhaps a heritage of his revolutionary period, was previously expressed in his creation of the nymphomaniac Lesbian analyst in *Arrival and Departure*. Now, Koestler pays verbal homage to Freud as opener of a new gateway "on humanity's path of progress," but rebukes him for chalking "over the lintel, 'All hope abandoned ye who enter here.'"

Koestler interprets Freud's terms with crude literalness, and attacks accordingly. For example, he asks: since the two basic Freudian drives, Eros, the Life Instinct, and Thanatos, the Death Instinct, are both regressive, how is it that the "evolutionary clock moves forward nevertheless?" The words "clock" and "forward" reveal Koestler's unwarranted assumption that (a) evolution is a directly verifiable fact rather than a highly speculative theory, and (b) evolution equals progress. The literal interpretation of instinct "regressiveness" (one of Freud's especially tentative hypotheses) to preclude development of the species amounts to distortion. Eros distinctly includes self-preservation and reproductive components; and what is regressive in one context is not so in another—e.g., Thanatos, encompassing the self-destroying impulses, leads to death—regressive for the individual organism, but essential for the development of the species. (Furthermore, at a later point Koestler himself speaks of the artist "regressing" to primitive modes of thought in the unconscious in order to make artistic progress. And one of his own pet notions is that of *reculer pour mieux sauter*, regressing in order to leap ahead.)

Koestler's naïve misreading and literal view of the Freudian concepts is further revealed when (a) he states that he cannot see how the Death Instinct can operate internally as senescence and, projected outwards, as aggression; (b) he declares that the Freudian structure implies that evolution stopped with Neanderthal man, and the history of the species since has been the
straitjacketing of immutable instincts and human nature by civilization, with crises generated because of the suppression of the destructive instinct; (c) he equates "sublimation" with "substitution" and counters the supposed Freudian notion that all cultural achievements are "coitus substitutes" by pointing out that periods of comparative sex freedom (Greece, the Renaissance) were not low in artistic creation as (presumably) we should expect.

Needless to say, many of the "refuted" Freudian concepts are utilized by Koestler in thinly disguised form. Freud, however, wrestled with the highly relevant questions: what real necessities cause us to ruin ourselves? what freedom of action is left us and how can we remove the false "necessities" barring us from acting fully? But Koestler simply restates the problem (atrophying of the "self-transcendent" tendencies) and skirts any real analysis, resorting to the type of dogmatism which Freud so deplored: "It is a popular habit in scientific matters to seize upon one side of the truth and set it up as the whole truth, and then in favor of this element of the truth to dispute all the rest which is equally true."

In dealing with artistic creation and the aesthetic experience this same black-and-white dogmatism, in the service of his "principles," leads Koestler to the conclusion that both the artist and his audience are, in effect, wholly actuated by "self-transcending" impulses. Ego-satisfaction and self-assertion by the artist is dismissed as a negligible factor. And the vicarious ego-assertion by the reader or spectator (achieved via identification or introjection) is not even considered. In brief, when art enters the ego abdicates—hardly a tenable thesis.

Koestler also declares flatly that a completely rational outlook today can lead only to nihilism. However, he continues, the increasing "emphasis on 'wholeness' in all branches of science" may result in the recognition of the "integrative tendency" as "the ultimate driving power of the evolutionary flux," thus end-
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ing the "ethical neutrality of science" and establishing a new "natural ethics" based on this "Natural Law." Disregarding the host of misconceptions and naïvetés involved in this notion, it sounds very much as if what we have here in disguised form is authoritarian ethics, apparently a requisite for Koestler's ideologic temperament, whose yearning for absolute roots is a prime source of his book's shortcomings.

Space does not permit further critical analysis of Koestler's principles which, to me, appeared neither coherent nor fertile. Scrutiny soon reduces the gilt-edge of this entire get-rich-quick scheme for absolute values and total truth in the intellectual and moral realms to its essential hand-me-down brassiness. Nevertheless, Insight and Outlook is in many ways a fascinating volume—for its innumerable bits of psychological and scientific information; for its provocative as well as genuinely inspirational passages; for the illusions it neatly punctures; and for its aseptic criticism and occasional flashes of insight and perception (on such varied topics as economy and illusion in art, the faults of our educational system, the basic unity of science, and archetypes and myths in artistic creation). Above all, the book is a valuable demonstration that intelligence and skepticism and a desperate desire for truth are not proof against inadequate logical and scientific equipment and a moralistic bias which impels one to err in the name of science in a manner theology no longer compels. The heights of science and truth are, indeed, closed to no one, but they cannot be scaled by irresponsible assault (whether of the Koestlerian-gadfly variety or the Toynbee-leviathan), only by arduous toil and a boldness disciplined by a healthy respect for the methods of scientific inquiry.