

Civilized Man's Deadly Sins – Konrad Lorenz

Timeless writing, timeless issues, but opinions that are very much of the 1970s.

Lorenz' writing style is timeless; he remains a delight to read. His catalog of the ills of mankind does not map precisely to the lists one sees composed today. So what? He was asking the right questions, and it is as instructive to see where he turned out to be partially wrong, as in overpopulation, as right.

This remains an important book, a point-in-time view of a great intellect. Moreover, the issues he raises continue to evolve, and he could well turn out to have been more prescient than he appears in this year, 2013, to have been.

1 Structural Properties and Functional Disorders of Living Systems 3

This chapter deals with equilibrium. Individual organisms have feedback mechanisms which insure that they remain in equilibrium. However, societies of organisms can easily get out of balance. Lorenz suggests that our human societies have so involved, on the strength of man's own intellect, that they are no longer subject to natural feedback mechanisms and are thus prone to lurch out of balance in dangerous directions.

2 Overpopulation 11

Lorenz claims that overcrowding leads to inhumanity – we are flooded with human contact. We become overwhelmed, leading to a lack of civility. Other factors are certainly at play. Robert Putnam speaks of the ills of diversity. Japanese tolerate each other much better in super-crowded Tokyo than the much lower density ethnic cocktails of Miami or Los Angeles tolerate one another.

The book reflects its time, 1973. Overpopulation was a huge concern; it is the time of Paul Ehrlich's "Population Bomb." It is interesting to note that since then the Caucasian and North Asian birth rates of every European, American and Asian country have fallen below replacement. The smart nations are failing to have children. The highest IQ nation to be reproducing itself is Argentina, with an average IQ of 96. Lorenz was worried about positive feedback loops. No, this one finally found negative feedback. People in cities, people with television, people dedicated to pursuing individual pleasures, and people without religion give up reproducing themselves.

3 Devastation of the Environment 15

Arguments against chemical fertilizers, drugs etc. may be overdrawn. Lorenz saw short-term consequences which have not materialized. However, longer term, we are a soft and dependent species. We are fragile, in the words of Nicholas Nassim Taleb's "Antifragile."

Lorenz argues against keeping men like chickens. Yet, in the place it was most extensively practiced, the former Soviet Union, the product is not that bad. They are able to keep their values, to reproduce. The essential ingredients seem to be homogeneity and belief in God. It is a functioning society. The human animal is remarkably adaptable physically. What Lorenz does not investigate is adaptability to hostile ethics and philosophies, such as diversity.

He argues against utilitarian architecture. Yet, it serves its purpose. One senses that architecture since the dawn of agriculture has been primarily utilitarian. The greater damage would seem to be to human relationships, as he indicated in the prior chapter.

4 Man's Race Against Himself 24

Lorenz noted that man has such control over his environment that he has outgrown any natural limits on his expansion. The result Lorenz foresaw could be disaster. He gave an example from nature:

To illustrate the consequences of intraspecific selection, my teacher Oskar Heinroth chose the example of the secondary feathers of the Argus cock pheasant, *Argusianus argus* L. In courtship, these are spread and presented to the hen in a way analogous to that of the peacock's tail, which is formed by the upper tail coverts. Just as in the peacock, so in the Argus, too, the choice of the partner evidently rests with the hen, and the mating chances of the cock are in fairly direct relation to the degree of attraction exerted on the hen by the male courtship organ. In flight, however, the peacock's tail is folded into a more or less streamlined stern and is scarcely a hindrance, whereas the elongated secondaries of the male Argus render him almost incapable of flight. That he has not become entirely so is obviously due to the fact that ground predators exert a selection pressure in the opposite direction, thereby bringing about the necessary regulating effect.

Oskar Heinroth, in his drastic manner, used to say, "After the wings of the Argus cock, the working pace of modern man is the stupidest product of intraspecific selection." At the time it was made, this assertion was surely prophetic. Today it is a classical understatement. In the Argus, as in many other animals with similar structures, environmental influences prevent the species from moving, by intraspecific selection, along monstrous evolutionary paths leading to catastrophe. No such salubrious regulating forces are at work in the cultural evolution of mankind. To his detriment, man has learned to govern all the forces of his extraspecific environment, but he knows so little about himself that he is helplessly at the mercy of the satanic workings of intraspecific selection.

Lorenz was concerned about the arc of progress in technology, medicine, warfare and other spheres. He was concerned that our inventiveness would kill us. Forty years later, the concerns are different. We are concerned that the less intelligent in every world culture are reproducing, whereas the more intelligent are diminishing in number. Yet, it is those more intelligent ones (Per Pinker's "Better Angels of our Nature") who have reduced violence to unprecedented levels.

5 Entropy of Feeling 31

Lorenz reacted with horror, appropriate horror, to the sexual revolution going on in his day:

For obvious reasons, the compelling desire for instant gratification has particularly deleterious results in sexual behavior. With the loss of the ability to pursue a distant goal, all delicately differentiated behavior patterns of courtship and pair formation disappear. This is true not only of instinctive but also of culturally programmed patterns, that is, not only of those patterns that have evolved in the course of phylogenesis for the purpose of keeping partners together, but also of analogous, specifically human, cultural norms of behavior, such as betrothal and marriage. To describe the consequences of this loss—namely, instant copulation, glorified in so many films today and raised to the level of the norm— as "animal" or "bestial" is quite misleading, for, in higher wild animals, such behavior is extremely rare. It is characteristic only of domestic animals since, in the interests of easy stock breeding, man has "bred out" all highly differentiated behavior patterns of mating.

He generalized that man needs challenges in his life. If it is too easy, he finds himself continually in quest of new distractions. More importantly, he cannot be satisfied with routine challenges such as those posed by marriage and child rearing. We become dysfunctional.

The year 2013 sees the confluence this observation and his overpopulation concern. We have stopped overpopulating because our mating process has become dysfunctional. This merits only half a hooray, because it is the more intelligent who suffer the problem.

6 Genetic Decay 43

Lorenz goes on a riff about modern criminology, which refuses to acknowledge the genetic basis of criminality and therefore the very limited degree to which criminals can be reconditioned and released into society. The magical belief that psychiatry has the power to change and cure people has led to vast mistakes in the administration of criminal justice.

Lorenz was wrong in a couple of particulars. First, he assumed that he had seen progressivism swing to a cyclical high in terms of permissiveness when he wrote in the 1970s. In that he was wrong. Whereas some of the trends have reversed themselves, such as teenage sexuality, the vast majority have expanded. Moreover, Lorenz saw a right wing counter reaction that he predicted also go overboard. Presumably he meant the John Birch society. Although there have been intermittent successes on the part of the right, most notably the Reagan revolution, the great secular trend has been for the right to adopt and even take credit for ideas that originate on the left. Affirmative action, the immigration act of 1986 which flooded the country with Hispanics, no child left behind, and prescription drug care in the United States for all endorsed and passed by Republicans.

Lorentz correctly sees temperament and intelligence as hereditary, and predicts that society's unwillingness to ostracize delinquents, keep them from reproducing, will lead to the weakening of all society. Our breeding stock will contain ever more antisocial genes, as the mechanisms which kept them from reproducing in more primitive times have been removed.

7 The Break with Tradition 61

Lorentz wrote at a time of extreme conflict between the generations: "The attitude of many of the younger generation toward their parents shows a good measure of conceited contempt but no understanding. The revolt of modern youth is founded on hatred, a hatred closely related to an emotion that is most dangerous and difficult to overcome: national hatred. In other words, today's rebellious youth reacts to the older generation in the same way that a culture group or "ethnic" group reacts to a foreign, hostile one."

In the two generations since Lorentz wrote, there is less apparent conflict between the old and the young. What one does observe is that the parental generations are distracted from the task of parenthood. As Lorentz observed in an earlier chapter, they are absorbed with career and money. They are also absorbed with their own infantile pleasures, including sexual pleasures, which among other things as led to an increase in divorce. Each succeeding generation learns less of its culture and tradition from the parents. At the same time, government schools, beginning as young as two or three years of age, and taken over the indoctrination of youth.

Lorentz correctly called the direction, but the mechanisms for change somewhat different than what he foresaw.

8 Indoctrinability 77

Lorentz describes the way in which scientific hypotheses are formulated and proven. Ultimately, they have to stand the test of time. Doctrines usually start out as hypotheses, with a core of truth. However, instead of being subjected to the rigors of scientific analysis, allowing themselves to be disproven, they expand through the accretion of disciples who defend the principles against all attacks.

He cites the example of Sigmund Freud. He had a few valuable insights, but when challenged with competing theories, reacted in a doctrinaire fashion. We observed the same phenomenon today among economists. A great number of them are disciples of various governments and central banks, and endorse the theory of endless expansion of the money supply. They mount attack ad hominem attacks against others who would challenge their theories.

Liberal and intellectual Americans, attracted to a sound, simple, easily intelligible and, above all, mechanistic teaching, accepted it almost without exception, particularly because here was a doctrine proclaiming itself as a liberating and democratic principle.

It is an indisputable ethical truth that all men have an equal right to the same chances of development, but this truth is all too easily converted to the untruth that all men are potentially equal. The behavioristic doctrine goes a step further in maintaining that all men would be equal if they could develop under the same external conditions, and indeed that they would become ideal people if only those conditions were ideal. Therefore, people cannot, or must not, possess any inherited properties, particularly those that determine their social behavior and their social requirements.

We can now look back on the effectiveness of Soviet indoctrination. I live in Kiev. After seventy years of atheistic brainwashing, they are much more religious than people in the US. They are deeply skeptical of government. The human animal has a healthy skepticism. Lorenz' worries about the USA seem more on target, because their concern is the soft embrace of commercialism.

9 Nuclear Weapons 99

Nothing to say. The cold war ended without their being used. Other threats today seem much greater.

And so it ends. A modest piece, a period piece, addressing some of the more important issues of his time and ours.