

**WORKING PAPER BY PROFESSOR ROGER SMITH, UNIVERSITY OF
WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

***KOESTLER THE CATALYST - CONNECTIONS TO MANAGEMENT AND LIFE
FROM A 20th CENTURY POLYMATH***

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September 5, 1905 is a date I consider to be significant because it is the day Arthur Koestler entered this mortal coil. As I hope to show, Arthur not only had a remarkable life, but he also had a significant impact on his world as one of the great men of letters of the 20th century. My caveat for this talk is that I am not an expert on Koestler or his works but rather someone who understands a little about him and who stands in awe of his achievements.

I met Arthur Koestler, via his writing rather than in person, in 1966. In my role as a training officer at that time with WA company CSBP & Farmers Ltd, I was designing and conducting supervisor and manager courses. When looking for information for a particular session on creativity my manager, a person of wide ranging interests and a rather formidable intellect, suggested I read Koestler's book "The Act of Creation". It blew my mind both as a brilliantly written explanation of the creative process and as a source of some very useful examples of creative thought. I still use the Buddhist monk problem in my classes on entrepreneurialism. I suspect that Edward De Bono owes not a little to the ideas espoused by Koestler.

Since that time I have read a number of Koestler's works and incorporated many of his concepts and ideas into my teaching of management, particularly when I want to present alternative views to the logico-quantitative approach that is so prevalent in our education system and in academic research on management and its associated disciplines. There is a paradox here in that Koestler chose sciences in both his secondary and tertiary studies and maintained a life long interest in the area.

Let me briefly introduce Arthur to you before I present and discuss some of his more, to me at least, useful material for living and for managers in particular. To put flesh on the bare bones I present (based on information from Pearson, 1978), you should read his biography titled "Koestler" by Ian Hamilton (1982). Koestler himself wrote four autobiographic books covering different stages of his hectic life - "Arrow in the Blue", "The Invisible Writing", "Scum of the Earth" and "Dialogue with Death", as well as 29 other publications ranging over a large range of topics.

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He was born in Budapest, Hungary, on September 5, 1905. His mother was a Jewish lady of high social standing and his father was a successful businessman. He contracted Parkinson's disease and leukemia in the late 1970's and on Tuesday evening, March 1, 1983 he and his wife Cynthia suicided together.

What a life he packed into the 78 years between those two events.

1924-26 Involved in Zionist politics - in Vienna as he studied science at the University of Vienna. and later in Palestine as a newspaper correspondent.

1927-1930 Foreign correspondent for the Ullstein newspaper chain in Germany and science editor of a well known journal, Vossische Zeitung.

1931- 1934 Joined the Communist Party and was banned from Germany and so moved to Paris. Traveled extensively in Russia and Soviet Asia.

1936-1937 War correspondent in Spain for London News Chronicle. Captured by nationalists and sentenced to death but freed after 6 months imprisonment as a result of protests from Britain.

1938 Formal break with Communist Party as a result of his disillusionment with the failure and degeneration of the Russian revolution. Editor of exile newspaper in Paris.

1939 Interned in French detention camp.

1939-1940 Joins French Foreign Legion and escapes to England after the fall of France.

1940-1983 Devotes life to writing and causes such as the repeal of capital punishment, better conditions in prisons, the campaign for nuclear disarmament and the right of cats and dogs to re-enter the UK without being quarantined. (A recent change of law in the UK has at last made this possible.)

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He became a British citizen in 1948 and was made a Fellow of the Royal Society for Literature in 1957 and spent 1964-5 as a Fellow of the Centre for Advanced Studies in the Behavioural Sciences at Stanford University.

He had a great interest in mysticism and parapsychology and this perhaps prevented him from being made a Fellow of the Royal Society or of receiving a Nobel prize. In comparison with his contemporaries, Orwell and Camus he has been largely ignored since the 1950's, for reasons I present shortly. However, he was awarded an MBE in 1972.

His tongue-in-cheek answer to a friend who congratulated him on the award gives some insight into his personality (Hamilton, 1982).

"Thank you for your letter of January 6 with your misguided reference to an MBE. This is given to slimy bureaucrats with a reptilian brain. Next comes the OBE, which is a lower mammalian attribute. Then comes the CBE, given to people supposedly endowed with the rudiments of a neo-cortex. It is at the same time the lowest rung on the snob ladder. So I am consulting my lawyers whether to sue you for slander."

Koestler was an intellectual whose exuberant actions have tended to cloud his intellectual contributions. While he left 500,000 pounds in his will to endow a Chair in Parapsychology at Edinburgh University, in the present highly charged world his attitude to women (more on this later) has led to his bust being removed from that University

His novel "Darkness at Noon" based on the Moscow purge trials of the 1930's, is recognised as one of the truly powerful works of twentieth century political literature and its role in the ultimate downfall of communism should not be discounted. It was published in 30 languages and is the penetrating story of an old-guard Bolshevik (ex-commissar N.S. Rubashov) who, during the purge trials, first denies and then confesses to crimes he has not committed. It ranks with Orwell's "Animal Farm" as the seminal work on the evils of totalitarianism.

"The Yogi and the Commissar", "The Act of Creation", "The Sleepwalkers", "The Ghost in the Machine", "The Case of the Midwife Toad" and "The Call-Girls" cemented his reputation as one of the great men of letters of this century.

Like many such great men he had plenty of flaws and was often selfish, rude, quarrelsome obsessive, obstinate and irrational. Other great men often disagreed with him and his opinions and ideas and he certainly had his detractors.

A recent book by David Cesarani (Arthur Koestler: The Homeless Mind) is particularly scathing of Koestler's personal behaviour. He says "a hopelessly destructive, vain, arrogant and self pitying man who disgraced each of his important relationships with disgraceful drunken rows and who had a despicable attitude towards women". This personal reputation, according to Cesarani, leaves his intellectual reputation in tatters.

However, whatever his flaws as a medium his messages were always innovative, thought provoking and catalytic in the sense of stimulating intense thought about the situations presented in his novels or the concepts presented in his non fiction work.

His friend George Mikes (Mikes, 1983) said that he was the last of the Renaissance men, five hundred years after the Renaissance. He was, said Mikes, a curious phenomenon in our age: he came too late. Or perhaps he came too early. It is far from impossible that humanity will soon discover that less narrow specialisation is needed and more Galileos and even Koestlers are urgently required.

In "The Sleepwalkers" Koestler quotes Seneca -" there is no great ingenuity without an admixture of dementedness". As a rule the dementedness devours the ingenuity but in Koestler's case it did not.

As you read and analyse Koestler's work, fiction and non-fiction, you are most often presented with the spectre of reason failing to triumph.

The bottom line for Koestler's understanding of the human condition is the irrationality of that condition.

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The following material attempts to present Koestler's views on a number of topics and to relate them specifically to areas of interest to managers and to academics who research in management and anyone with an interest in life and its living.

I do not analyse what he says in any depth but present various and particular excerpts and interpretations of what he says in the hope that you will be stimulated to follow up on the rich diversity of his thinking. The areas in which I suggest he has most to offer us are those of creativity, learning, culture, group behaviour, management and research/intellectualism.

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KOESTLER AND CREATIVITY

Excerpts/ideas from "The Act of Creation"

" Creativity - a type of learning where the teacher and the pupil are located in the same individual."

*"The interlocking of two or more previously unrelated skills or matrices of thought seems to be the basic pattern of discovery. Koestler calls this creative process **bisociation**. Associative thought operates along members of a single pre-existing matrix. **Bisociation** is taken to point to the independent autonomous character of matrices that are brought into contact in the creative act.)*

Discovery occurs when people ask why as well as how.

There appears to be a paradox in that the more original the discovery, the more obvious it seems afterwards.

This can result in arrival at the right destination by the wrong boat i.e. it is not necessarily an analytical process."

He saw the creative act as an *upward* surge from some unknown, fertile underground layers of the mind, whereas the exercise of a skill is a *downward* relegation of the controls of skilled techniques.

Language was of great interest to Koestler. To him it was a screen that stands between the thinker and reality. This is one reason why true creativity often starts where language ends. He quotes the example of having a length of string with a pendulum attached, and a nail, and the problem of how to affix the pendulum to the wall - you must separate the 'pendulum' from the 'string' and see the pendulum as a 'hammer' to get the solution - *it is very easy to ignore the obvious.*

We tend to stubbornly adhere to our perceptual frames and matrices of thought and our language definitions.

The pre-requisite of originality or creativity for Koestler is the art of forgetting at the proper moment, what we know.

"The essence of science lies not in discovering new facts but in discovering new ways of thinking about them.

When thought is dominated by emotion and faith the Red Queen always scores over reasonable Alice who asserts that 'one can't believe impossible things' whereas the Queen after a little practice managed to believe' as many as six impossible things' before breakfast."

The main distinguishing features of associative and bisociative thought for Koestler may be summed up as the difference between habit, conservatism and repetitiveness and originality and novelty and super flexibility.

As Gauss is said to have claimed - 'I have had my solutions for a long time but I do not know how I am going to arrive at them'. The mind, owing to its hierarchic organisation, functions on several levels at once and often one level does not know what the other is doing ; the essence of the creative act is bringing them together.

The Four Stages of Creativity (from "Kaleidoscope")

"The four factors that I submit serve as the criteria for creativity are - originality (of the ideas), the improbability of the combination of ideas (bisociation), their constructive-destructive aspect (in terms of upsetting the status quo), and the intervention of extra-conscious processes (letting the mind wander for example). the first rule is to have brains and good luck and the second is to sit tight and wait until you get a bright idea!"

Excerpts from "The Sleepwalkers"

"The inertia of the human mind and its resistance to innovation are most clearly demonstrated not, as one would expect by the ignorant mass - which is easily swayed once its imagination is caught - but by professionals with a vested interest in tradition and in the monopoly of learning."

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KOESTLER AND LEARNING

Excerpt/ideas from "The Act of Creation"

"The learning process is, somewhat paradoxically, easiest to visualise as a reversal of the hierarchical sequence of operations which will characterise performance when learning is completed.

Motor learning proceeds from the lower to the higher levels and performance in the reverse direction.

The controversy over learning theory is essentially that between drill and insight. It is probably better to consider learning as a continuum within these extremes.

Learning in a general sense consists of putting two and two or A and B together. It may be done gradually by plodding through hypotheses and eliminations; or all of a sudden following upon a single implicit try."

Rebellion in a Vacuum (From "Kaleidoscope")

"My own preference is for defining the purpose of education as 'catalysing the mind'. To influence or facilitate is to intrude; a catalyst, on the other hand, is defined as an agent that triggers or speeds up a chemical reaction without being involved in the product.

The ideal educator acts as a catalyst not as a conditioning influence.

An essential part of this catalysing function is to enable the student to re-live to some extent the creative process that led to the present position of the discipline he or she is learning about. This means that the history of the discipline ought to be made a principle part of the curriculum and it should be presented in its evolutionary context - not as a Minerva born fully armed.

Presenting the earlier problems, ideas, struggles, can enable students to re-live and attempt to solve the problems themselves and thus learn as their predecessors learned."

"The skills of reasoning rely on habit, governed by well established rules of the game; the 'reasonable person' - used as a standard norm in English common law - is level headed instead of multi level headed; adaptive and not destructive; an enlightened conservative not a revolutionary; and willing to learn under proper guidance; but - unable to be guided by his dreams."

"It is strange to reflect that a major part of our scientific and philosophical vocabulary consists of old Greek bottles filled and refilled with new wine, e.g. electron once meant a piece of amber and Homer's cosmos a flat disc covered by a vault. A concept has as many dimensions in semantic space as there are matrices of which it is a member. (The Red Queen says - a word means what I intend it to mean.)"

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KOESTLER AND CULTURE

Reflections on a Peninsula (From "Kaleidoscope")

"Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, which gave rise to the great Asian cultures, have certain essential features in common which are in direct opposition to Western or European thought.

*The contrast is not, as one tends to believe, between so-called Eastern spiritualism and so-called Western materialism, but between two basically different attitudes to life - so different that a German orientalist (William Haas, Destiny of the Mind, London 1956) suggested a new word for the Eastern approach to existence: *philousia* as opposed to Western philosophy.*

All the evidence, from the Upanishads and the Tao Te-Ching, to the contemporary schools of Yoga and Zen Buddhism, unmistakably indicates that Eastern thinkers are less interested in factual knowledge - in sophia, from which philosophia is derived - than in ousia, essential being: they are more interested in the nature of consciousness itself than in the objects of consciousness.

When you look at India, pre-revolutionary China, or Japan, you find a basic trend of thought amongst the great thinkers, which rejects all sense experience as illusion, denies that the world of objects has a reality independent from the perceiving subject, and which finds it "exceedingly odd that the tree should continue to be when there is no one around in the quad".

It is an attitude that prefers intuition to reason, fluid symbols to sharply defined concepts, thinking in images to thinking in categories, which rejects the axioms of Western (i.e. Greek) logic- such as the laws of identity, contradiction and the excluded middle.

Above all, the Eastern sage strives after self-realisation through the annihilation of the thinking and feeling self; his ideal is de-personalisation, the drowning and dissolving of individuality in the universal pool of Atma, Brahma, Nirvana - as opposed to the Western ideal of self-realisation through the unfolding of individual potentialities.

This fundamental parting of the ways seems to have occurred in the sixth century BC. It is fascinating to note how the split is reflected in the spirit and structure of the language itself.

Out of the same Sanskrit root, matr-, emerged two key words, maya and meron. Maya, in Hinduism and Buddhism, is the symbol of an attitude that regards the visible world as a web of illusions - the veil of maya; whereas meron, measure, regards it as something to be grasped, measured and mastered by the mind.

Thus in the Ionian school of philosophy in the sixth century BC, rational thought was emerging from the dream world to begin the great European adventure which, within two thousand years, transformed our species more radically than the previous hundred thousand years had done."

Farewell to Gauguin (From "Kaleidoscope")

"Our around the world journey took two months and we returned, to coin a phrase, impoverished by the experience.

Looking back on it, much seemed like a journey through an air-conditioned, neon-lit tunnel, filled with the ubiquitous sound of Muzak, the smell of hamburgers, and the sight of blue-haired matrons spending the insurance money of their deceased husbands on package tours from one duty-free shop to another.

Every day about 5.30 pm, the tunnel changes into the dark womb of the same cocktail bar in the same Hilton or Sheraton in Honolulu, Fiji or Teheran; where the same freeze-broiled choice T-bone is banged down by the same Italian waiter beside the same spluttering candle on your table. Never a native dish. Never a tropical fruit.

And all the time, day by day in every way, the muddy floods of Muzak pour down on you, piped into the lift, the lobby, the loo, bar, restaurant, swimming pool, coral beach - a tonal diarrhea, unrelenting, inescapable.

There are worldwide crusades for the preservation of wildlife and the countryside; it is time somebody started a movement for the preservation of silence.

The explosion of the tourist industry and its culture-eroding fall-out is not the minor nuisance it is assumed to be. It is a plague of locusts which brings to the natives material prosperity and cultural corruption, eroding traditional ways of living, contaminating arts and crafts with the vulgarity of the souvenir industry, and levelling down indigenous cultures to a uniform, mechanised stereotyped norm.

The majority of tourists travel like registered parcels, unaware of the natives, their aspirations, problems and tragedies. Instead of promoting mutual understanding, they promote mutual contempt."

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KOESTLER AND THE GROUP

The Urge to Self Destruction (From "Kaleidoscope")

While Koestler is here considering the issues of crime and war, there is a message in his writing for any manager concerned with group behaviour in organisations.

"Thus we are driven to the unfashionable and uncomfortable conclusion that the trouble with our species is not an overdose of self-asserting aggression, but an excess of self-transcending devotion.

Even a cursory glance at history should convince one that individual crimes committed for selfish motives play a quite insignificant role in the human tragedy compared with the numbers massacred in unselfish love of one's tribe, nation, dynasty, church or ideology. Homicide committed for personal reasons is a statistical rarity in all cultures, including our own. Homicide for unselfish reasons, at the risk of one's own life, is the dominant phenomenon in history.

This is a de-personalised, quite unselfish kind of savagery, generated by the group mind, which is largely indifferent to, or even opposed, to the interests of the individuals who constitute the group.

Thus the mentality of the group is not the sum of the individual minds; it has its own pattern and obeys its own rules which cannot be "reduced" to the rules which govern individual behaviour.

The individual is not a killer, the group is, and by identifying with it the individual is transformed into a killer.

The egotism of the group feeds on the altruism of its members; the savagery of the group feeds on the devotion of its members.

One of the main causes of man's predicament is language - wars are fought for words, they are our most deadly weapon.

Each language acts as a powerful cohesive force within the group and as an equally powerful divisive force between groups - even within the same culture."

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KOESTLER AND MANAGEMENT

Comment on "The Yogi and the Commissar"

In this book Koestler grapples with a major dilemma of the human condition, the problem of ends and means. He treats this dilemma in the context of Communism and the Russian revolution and his thesis is that the revolution was doomed from the beginning because of the iron political law that revolution fails whenever either ends or means dominates the other. The symbolism he chooses to express this dilemma is that of the yogi and the commissar.

They are representative types of man who are assigned opposite ends of the political spectrum. In my view much of this work makes great sense also when we substitute "management" for "politics" and "manager" for "politician". With this view in mind the following ideas from the book are shown as espoused by Koestler but from a managerial perspective.

*"The yogi believes that means alone count in **management** and that all efforts to justify **management** action must focus exclusively on those means.*

For the yogi mentality there is no social change except that which follows from a change in the soul of an individual. He takes it for granted that the ends of everything human in origin are unpredictable and hence that there can never be a rational theory of society that is future oriented.

*The yogi argues that reason alone cannot be an effective guide in **management** - the closer people approach the absolute truth the more likely reason is to fail as a guide.*

*His sense of morality is strictly internalised. It is a mentality that disposes the yogi toward passivity in **management**.*

At the other end of the idealised spectrum stands the pure form of the commissar. He is the mirror image of the yogi in every respect.

*He is the supreme **management** activist for whom all **management** morality must be structured with exclusive reference to the ends sought. To him it is the end alone that matters and everything that serves that end is by definition moral. There is no such thing as permanence, everything is in a state of flux. There is no defect in human character or institutions that cannot be changed by the proper application of socio-political **management** techniques. By implication there is a scientific answer to every problem in the human condition.*

*The answer is a deterministic one that sees events strictly from within a cause-effect relationship. He would never admit that the future is opaque and unpredictable. He is in short a revolutionary whose **management** style is predicated on his vision that an earthly paradise can and will take concrete form in the here and now.*

*Participation in **management** means to choose fatefully between ends and means."*

For Koestler's scheme of political reality, practical politics is ultimately the monopoly of one or other of these two ideal types. He suggests that "half way house" politics never succeed because he sees them as soft options to avoid the hard choices of real politics. Man has made a mess of his history either because means were subordinated to the end, or the end to the means.

From a management perspective his schema is very similar to the McGregor theory X and Y approach. Y is the yogi, X the commissar. However, McGregor envisaged a continuum whereas Koestler does not ie "half way houses" are not on.

Such "half way" debate as appears rational to the halfway house intellectuals is founded on an illusion because the argument leads nowhere as the real issue remains that between fundamental conceptions - change from without and change from within.

The Commissar is very much a Skinner behaviourist approach and the Yogi smacks of Sigmund Freud.

In my view much of management has become dominated by the commissar approach. It is time for yogi reassertion.

KOESTLER AND RESEARCH/INTELLECTUALISM

Excerpts/ideas from "The Sleepwalkers"

"The history of cosmic theories in particular may, without exaggeration, be called a history of collective obsessions and controlled schizophrenias; and the manner in which some of the most important individual discoveries were arrived at reminds one more of a sleepwalker's performance than an electronic brain's.

Thus in taking down Copernicus or Galileo from the pedestal on which science-mythography has placed them, my motive was not to "debunk", but to inquire into the obscure workings of the creative mind.

Yet I shall not be sorry if, as an accidental byproduct, the inquiry helps to counteract the legend that Science is a purely rational pursuit, and that the Scientist is a more "level headed" and "dispassionate" type than others (and should therefore be given a leading part in world affairs); or that he is able to provide for himself and his contemporaries, a rational substitute for ethical insights derived from other sources."

In modern science and research:

"The reduction of quality to quantity (colour, sound radiation etc to vibrational frequencies and human values to raw scores) has meant that we can measure results but we do not know what is being measured. All we do know in fact is that we read our instruments - the number of clicks on a Geiger counter, the position of a pointer on a dial or the position of a tick on a Likert scale - and interpret the signs according to the rules of the game. The quantities have as much resemblance to qualities as a telephone number has to a subscriber."

Koestler postulates that within the foreseeable future, man will either destroy himself or take off for the stars. It is doubtful, he says, whether reasoned argument will play any significant part in our ultimate decision, but if it does, a clearer insight into the evolution of ideas that led to the present predicament may be of some value.

He considers that the muddle of inspiration and delusion, of visionary insight and dogmatic blindness, of millennial obsessions and disciplined double-think, which his narrative has tried to trace, may serve as a cautionary tale against the hubris of science - or rather the philosophical outlook based on it.

"The dials on our laboratory panels are turning into another version of Plato's shadows in the cave. Our hypnotic enslavement to the numerical aspects of reality has dulled our perception of the non-quantitative moral values; the resultant end-justifies-the means ethics may be a major factor in our undoing. We may become the worshippers of the new Baal, lording it over the moral vacuum with his electronic brain."

Comment on "The Call Girls".

The novel parodies the intellectual and scientific elites who populate the international guest lecture and conference circuit. (Koestler calls them intellectual call girls.)

As a class they suffer from political impotence; their problem is an inability to wed their massive intellects and genuine scientific contributions to the ordinary canons of political action. Their political impotence however is in inverse proportion to their own sense of importance.

The setting of the novel is one of those international conferences that has been called to save the world from its follies. The very success of the participants in their fields of expertise is however their greatest weakness. - they are unable to see the problems of science and survival except from their own perspectives. It is the effect of over specialisation. It is unavoidable but it may lead to a kind of stunted personality because they feel more and more passionately about lesser and lesser fragments of the world.

The conference becomes a battle between the materialists ("show me a slice of your super ego under a microscope and I will believe it") and the non-materialists ("the unseen and unmeasurable are the prime movers on the human condition").

The conference does not save the world from its follies even in this work of fiction!

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CONCLUDING COMMENT

Obviously there is much more to Koestler than I have been able to cover and my interpretations lag far behind his original contributions in terms of scholarship and erudition. He was never the traditional scientific or political writer and thinker but was always prepared to push beyond the conventional boundaries. He was not an armchair academic and thus drew the wrath of intellectuals with his womanizing, drinking and pursuit of adventure.

While his personal life may have overshadowed his public achievements, this introduction to his critiques of "rational man" and the lust for certainty, of the overemphasis on quantitative research and of reason's dominance over intuition along with his views on creativity and learning does, I hope, give you a reason to think about these issues again.

Preparation of this paper also reinforces one of my pet beliefs and gives me another opportunity to state it once again. This is that the study of the classic works of early writers on management and the works of writers in many of the disciplines that underpin management theory would be as valuable to students of management as the modern texts that are usually served up and are often no more than old wine in new bottles.

Koestler's books remain as a permanent testament to my view, a view shared by many others, that he was one of the literary geniuses and towering intellects of the 20th century despite his personal grief and relationship disasters.

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Roger C. Smith