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Preface

To choose to be constructive rather than destructive, we need to know the difference. Typically, however, only large or even extreme differences grab our attention in such a way that we are impelled to action. During the course of my writing this book in the 1990s, certain relatively subtle destructive influences damaging to human life, that were long in the simmering stages, finally began to grab attention in the U.S., particularly the surge in youth violence during the early and middle 1990s.

Overall, rates of lethal criminality in the U.S. lessened in the late 1990s, though not enough to remove the country from the list of the world's violent crime leaders. Meanwhile, certain more massively destructive events, such as the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City and the Federal Center in Oklahoma City, were extraordinary; they were so different from "ordinary" violent crimes as to stir concern of a different kind and level. Those planned "sneak attacks" were utter surprises, the deadly results of conspiratorial planning by covertly organized groups. School violence in the late 1990s, including Colorado's Columbine High School lethal gun and bomb attack that resulted in 15 deaths, combined some of the ingredients of recent kinds of killing with other ingredients that brought terrorism even closer to home. The attacks featured both guns and bombs, youth violence, conspiratorial planning and execution, and a seemingly naive and unsuspecting citizenry ranging through parents, police, school officials, and students — all of them connected by partial, insufficient awareness of the student perpetrators' destructive mentality.

The Columbine tragedy resulted in a mix of reactions and responses. Many suspects were named: the personalities and the alienation of the perpetrating students, the easy availability of guns and bomb-making instructions, violence in the media and in entertainment of almost every sort, parental neglect, police underestimation of threatening behavior, inadequate school security systems, students who looked down on other less-popular students, and so on. As can be understood — but only when the true complexity of violence causation is understood — none of these suspected factors is singularly causative nor are any irrelevant. Not knowing how to understand,

together with the wish to deny and not understand such tragic events, results in helpless, despairing conclusions such as, "We will never understand."

Hopefully, and for a change, certain somewhat more thought-out initiatives to prevent further violence have begun to be considered. For example, "the marketing of mayhem in movies, music, and video games," which became blatantly obvious in the 1990s, was finally getting more concentrated general attention (Broder, 1999) and restrictions on gun availability became seriously considered. But attention peaks in the reactive period immediately after a sensationally destructive event and then fades.

We seem always to need more mayhem to provoke admission of the obvious. Following a further series of "madman shootings," a September 1999 editorial in the *New York Times* admitted that the "pathology" involved was not merely in the immediate perpetrators: "But there is only one overriding pathology, and it is guns" (Grasping the Obvious Pathology, 1999, page A22). Earlier that month, television's NBC News aired the Centers for Disease Control report that the U.S. has 250 million guns and nine times the rate of gun deaths than the average of the other industrialized nations. The data are available, but denial and deliberate obfuscation of the obvious retards understanding.

No initiatives will really succeed unless they are informed by sober realizations of the longer-term synergistic patterns of violence causation. These patterns must be understood by as many people as possible so that wise initiatives and constructive responses will have powerful grass roots support. We cannot merely depend on government leaders who, inevitably, must follow public opinion at least as much as they lead it.

Adequate understanding of how to counter the age-old problem of violence requires deeper and broader knowledge than we gather from current events at home in the U.S. We are rapidly becoming a world society affected by myriad cultures with deep historical roots. If we remain nearsighted and culture-bound, we will continue to be more reactive rather than knowledgeably initiating constructive changes.

Assuming that we want a long run for humanity on this Earth — a questionable assumption discussed early in this book — we need to discover the complex causation of both destructive and constructive behavior. In the process, we will have to unmask the denial and evasion of discovery that serve to perpetuate and escalate violence.

Why must we come to understand the subtleties of human mentality and relationships? After all, it's not rocket science. No, it's not. The art and science of constructive human relationships is far more difficult than rocket science! Even a glance at the 20th century shows that rockets with ever greater power, range, and precision are being developed at an accelerating rate while human destructiveness is also developing at an accelerating rate. We must dedicate ourselves to the demonstrably more difficult challenge. Humans

have clearly demonstrated that rocket science is easy indeed compared to human relationships.

This book is meant to convey a deep and lasting explanation of destructive behavior and mentality to make possible constructive action by as many people as possible. We need everyone to become powerful enough to be a definite constructive influence.

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Finally, I am indebted to hundreds of other authors whose works relevant to this book I have read over the years. I have selected 27 of their most valuable books for this book's annotated bibliography so as to introduce the reader to some of their works as well.

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Dedication

*To William Bowen,
African American Forensic Psychologist
whose courage, compassion, and competence
epitomized the constructive mentality and have
transcended his time on this Earth*

Contents

1	Dilemmas for the 21st Century	1
	Constructive and Destructive Mentalities	1
	Mapping the Journey of Discovery	4
	Staying Alive and Awake	6
	Awakening to the Subtleties of Dehumanization	7
	Denial in the 20th Century	10
	The Art and Science of Covert Destructive Persuasion	14
	Basic Considerations: A Dialogue with the Devil's Advocate	17
	Summary	23
	Bibliography	24
	References	25
2	Social Inducements to Paraletal and Lethal Violence	27
	The Violence Trend in the 20th Century	27
	Denials and Some "Solutions" that Contribute to Violence	30
	More Prisoners	30
	More Death Penalties	31
	More Police	33
	More Guns	33
	More Beatings	35
	Causal Influences	36
	The O. J. Simpson Feeding Frenzy	37
	Definitions and Denials of Responsibility	38
	Legal Inducements to Violence	39
	It's the Rage: A Gun Is Fun	40
	The Media and Violence Entertainment	41
	A Night at the Movies: Popcorn, Soda, and Splattered Brains	43
	Parties to the Sadomasochistic Violence-Addiction Contract	48
	Product Formulation	49
	Beguiling the Buyer	50

Social Structure and Dynamics of Para-lethal Violence	53
Lethal Violence Causality and the Second Cybernetics	53
Institutional Factors in the Violence Culture	55
Protest Masculinity	56
Fatherlessness, Poverty, and Race	58
Defenders of Para-lethal Violence	60
How Can We Counter and Replace Our Violence Culture?	61
Improve Parenting	61
Teach Critical Thinking	63
Counter Racism	64
Reform Education	65
Fill the Spiritual Void	66
Support but Do Not Rely upon Legal Solutions	66
Summary	67
Bibliography	68
References	69

3	Inhibiting Fatal Group and Institutional Aggression	73
	The Inherently Violent Tendency of Institutions	75
	Examples of Mandated, Legally Limited, Institutional Aggression	76
	The Legal Profession	77
	The Profession of Journalism	78
	Sports	78
	Examples of Illegal Violence in Legal Institutions	81
	Colleges and Universities	81
	The Military	82
	Antigovernment Extremists, Terrorists, and Deadly Cults	84
	The Antigovernment Extremist Patriots	84
	Government Facilitation of Antigovernment Extremists	86
	The Aum Doomsday Cult	89
	The Art and Science of Inducing Violent Behavior	92
	Reality vs. Paranoia	94
	Blueprint for Inhibiting Institutional Violence	98
	Repression	98
	Negotiation	100
	Intra-Individual Inhibitions against Violence	101
	How to Relate to Potentially Violent Antigovernment Activists	103
	Take Their Complaints Very Seriously	103
	Encourage and Cooperate with Factual Investigations	103

Provide, Where Interest Is Shown, Factual Information Related to the Complaints	104
Educate	104
Summary	105
Bibliography	106
References	107

4 The Central Intelligence Agency and Lethal Violence 111

Early Development and Present Formation	112
Early Development	112
Present Formation: The CIA in the 1990s	114
Cycles of Violence and Reform	117
Into the 1970s	122
The 1980s	123
Revelations and Reservations in the 1990s	127
Ethics Questions	129
Rationales and Rationalizations	130
Qualms and Quibbles	133
Machinating Mentalities	134
The War against Feelings	134
Heroes	138
Traitors	141
Mind Control Programs	145
MKULTRA and Dr. Cameron	145
Psychic Warriors	150
Efficacy Questions	153
Prospects and Recommendations	155
Summary	157
Bibliography	157
References	159

5 Lethal Violence by Entire Governments 163

The Facts of Democide	163
Dynamics of Power and Freedom	165
Authoritarian Personalities and Governments	166
Human Destructiveness as Folly	168
The Case of Adolph Hitler and Nazi Germany	176
Why Study Hitler and the Nazis?	176
Psychological Understanding of Hitler	178
Hitler as Master of Propaganda	181

	The Two Hitlers	182
	Was Hitler Mad or just Bad?	185
	Genesis of Hitler's Destructive Mentality	188
	Lessons Tyrants Have Taught Us	189
	Summary	191
	Bibliography	192
	References	194
6	Transcendence: Constructive vs. Destructive Mentality	195
	Courage and Kindness of Rescue Conspiracies	195
	William R. Perl and the Sealifts	195
	Corrie ten Boom and the Dutch	196
	Bulgaria's Protective Coalition	197
	Transcendence in Concentration Camps	201
	Developing Constructive Mentality	203
	Conclusion	206
	Summary	215
	Bibliography	216
	References	217
	Index	219

Dilemmas for the 21st Century

1

This book is a search for answers to fundamental dilemmas that have been worsening over the millennia. Civilization purportedly serves to make human life safer and to enhance life by inhibiting the “animal instincts” to violence, selfish aggrandizement, and unrestricted sexual expression; yet the more we have become “civilized,” the greater the rate at which humans have destroyed one another, whether for the sake of domination, material gain, notoriety, or to reduce population. Along the way, we humans have also been destroying the planet’s resources needed to make our continuance as a species possible. Have we been merely substituting more humanly instigated destructiveness for nature’s methods of population control? In effect, we are — by engaging ever more effectively in destroying human lives and the future of our own species as well as other forms of life.

What are the alternatives, if any? Can we find them and show how they can be used to our long-term and, perhaps, even short-term advantage? The latter is vitally important because it is difficult to persuade people to embrace behavior that is beneficial for them only in the long run. The search must elucidate not only the causes of direct lethal violence but also “para-lethal violence,” meaning activities that are not lethal themselves but are harmful and promote lethal violence.

Constructive and Destructive Mentalities

What are the differences between constructive and destructive mentalities? The word mentality has two meanings: first, mental power or capacity and therefore learning ability and intelligence; second, a mode or way of thought, a disposition, mental set, or outlook. As used in this book, mentality means both intelligence and mental set since both must be taken into account to predict and change behavior.

Intelligence by itself is not an effective predictor of constructive vs. destructive behavior. Unless we believe that the human species has become less intelligent over the centuries of recorded history, we cannot say that intelligence or learning ability, per se, are safeguards against destructive behavior.

Indisputably, highly intelligent human beings have invented and deployed ever more sophisticated weapons of destruction. And as our species has grown intellectually over the millennia, we have become more lethal overall.

If we compare ourselves as a species to our nearest though less intelligent relatives, the apes, clearly we are enormously more destructive. Our very nearest relatives, the Bonobo chimpanzees, are very similar genetically but not behaviorally in some important ways. Although long and closely studied, Bonobos have never been observed to kill others of their kind (Eisler, 1996, page 41); yet they possess 98% of the genetic structure of humans. Thus, merely fostering human intelligence and knowledge per se does not augur well for the survival of the human species, nor can we dismiss our destructiveness as the mere product of our genetics. Our highly developed human intelligence and knowledge can be used for constructive or destructive purposes.

Sometimes, failure to use our intelligence has destructive consequences, as we recognize when we remark, "That was a dumb thing to do" or, "So and so wasn't thinking or he wouldn't have done that." We judge that some destructive behavior shows a lapse in intelligence. Destructiveness may be an act of folly, a foolish failure to think ahead and realize consequences for oneself and others — the result of not using one's head, so to speak. Historian Barbara Tuchman's book *The March of Folly* (1984), discussed in Chapter 5 of this book, is a convincing account of how folly, defined as the pursuit of policy contrary to self-interest, has characterized a long series of mammoth debacles from the Trojan War to the euphemistically labeled "Vietnam Conflict." The leaders and followers of these follies were not without intelligence as it is usually defined. Some of the leaders were even called, justifiably according to the orthodox definition, "the best and the brightest."

Intelligence, the capacity to acquire and apply knowledge, is a neutral party that lends itself with equal facility to constructive or destructive behavior. People in the 20th century have used knowledge to perpetrate a quantity and rate of lethal violence that dwarfs that of the previous two centuries combined. The progressive acceleration of technological development, based as it is on intellectual achievement, has not only made possible but has been used to actuate massive human destructiveness in every realm, including the ecological as well as interpersonal. Yet, we cannot validly blame technology. The 20th century has also witnessed astounding improvements, largely ascribable to technology, in our capacity for healthy and humane living. Clearly, intelligence by itself does not guarantee constructive behavior.

Is our disposition, mental set, or outlook crucial to our behaving constructively? Not by itself. Kindly disposed people may not grasp the complexities of strategies needed to create constructive change. We have all heard concessions to this fact, such as "Well, his heart was in the right place" offered as an excuse for some negative outcome of well-intentioned behavior. The

epigram, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions,” speaks to this fact, as does Mark Twain’s remark: “If a man came to my door to do me good, I would run for my life.” Good intentions by themselves can have destructive consequences.

For example, in Calcutta, India 4 million cylinder-type wells were sunk as part of a safe-water program with the financial support of the Bangladesh government and charitable groups, principally UNICEF — all with constructive intent. But while the project saved many people from deadly bacteria in surface water, it poisoned others because, unwittingly, the cylinders had been sunk into an aquifer naturally tainted with harmful levels of arsenic (Bearak, 1998).

While neither intelligence nor intention by themselves are adequate to produce constructive behavior and outcomes, positive intentions paired with knowledge can be powerfully constructive while negative intentions paired with knowledge can be powerfully destructive. What do we mean, though, by good or bad intentions? And what do we mean by constructive and destructive behavior? People usually claim to be able to tell the difference between constructive and destructive behavior. But what is judged to be constructive or destructive depends largely on who is doing the judging. Virtually every individual murderer, to the extent that he admits to the act, defends it as constructive or at least necessary, and entire nations who are committing massive lethal violence against other nations or against their own citizens defend their actions as constructive. Such mentality is captured in the oxymoron “ethnic cleansing,” which its advocates claim to be constructive.

To understand anything, we must contrast it with something else. Indeed, even to perceive anything at all, to simply recognize it or to give it a name, we must see it in contrast to something else. We cannot recognize day unless we experience night. The more stark the contrast, the more readily we see the difference and know, therefore, that something is present. Because our ability to perceive is dependent on experiencing contrast, to improve the balance between human destructiveness vs. constructiveness, we must clearly perceive and understand the differences even when they are subtle.

This task may seem easy. Doesn’t everyone know the difference between constructive and destructive behavior and, for that matter, between constructive vs. destructive mentalities? The answer must be an emphatic NO! As will be illustrated in the early chapters of this book, much, perhaps most of our individual and collective or group behavior, is a complex mix of constructive and destructive behavior and mentality, and the differences are often subtle but important.

The easiest mistake to make in addressing human destructiveness, and probably the most frequent, is to limit causal explanation to one or even a few factors. Ron Rosenbaum’s book *Explaining Hitler* (1998) shows how

many even otherwise sophisticated attempts to explain Hitler's "demonic" behavior have lacked an adequate conception of causality. Too little credence has been given, in the vast majority of causal explanations of human destructiveness, to the dynamic interrelationship of the full array of historical and contemporaneous forces and circumstances influencing the mentality of personalities and groups. Even the most determined "evil" individual must be supported by circumstances and many other people in order to perpetrate genocide or other forms of mass killing that account for most of the immense 20th century-surge in lethal violence.

To avoid this mistake, particularly to avoid focusing excessively on the most proximate of causes, I shall emphasize the importance of paraethical causation: those indirect causative factors or influences that promote and facilitate lethal behavior.

Mapping the Journey of Discovery

To find answers means discovering various personal and institutional mentalities ranging from the conventionally acceptable to the controversial and on to those that are more blatantly destructive. Along the way we can become aware of commonalities in the destructive mentality, such as willingness to dehumanize vs. the insistence on respect which is characteristic of constructive mentality.

This chapter, *Dilemmas for the 21st Century*, introduces basic considerations and some working concepts. It begins to address fundamental threats to survival, including dehumanization, denial and distortion of truth, and population pressures. Chapters 2 through 5 depict a continuum of institutional destructiveness from the too-readily-acceptable to the most blatant forms.

Chapter 2 addresses social inducements to paraethical and lethal violence in our present Western civilization, with primary emphasis on the U.S. It shows how even relatively well-accepted institutions may be more destructive than we usually perceive. Although the U.S. may be the greatest nation on Earth, it is also a Western civilization leader in many kinds of destructiveness, as shown in rates of murder, violent crimes by and against youth, incarceration, weapons production and exportation, and illicit or morbid drug use. The causes of these behaviors are to be found mainly within rather than outside of our borders. It is largely a case of "We have met the enemy and it is us," wherein "us" stands for the U.S.

Nevertheless, insofar as the U.S. lives up to its democratic ideals, we are made far safer, along with other democracies, from the mass destructiveness of war and by death at the hands of our own government. Furthermore, our

democratic society makes it possible to be watchful and constructively critical, as this book is intended to be. With all its flaws, which demand so much critical attention, we are extremely fortunate to be a democratic nation. As Winston Churchill said, "Democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms which have been tried from time to time" (as quoted in Humes, 1994).

Chapter 3, *Inhibiting Fatal Group and Institutional Aggression*, discusses clearly controversial institutions that emphasize secrecy and are not socially or legally accountable. They are exemplified by certain nongovernmental militia groups in the U.S. and by the Japan-based terrorist cult known as Aum. Each example illustrates the current trend toward terrorism by groups who feel disempowered. Within our nation, so-called militia groups comprise a mixture of legitimate concerns about individual rights together with concerns of a seemingly paranoid nature. Their more aggressive tendencies may become terroristic.

The second institutional example is of fairly recent origin in Japan. "Aum," as it is called, illustrates the deadly nature of terroristic cults which often tend to destroy themselves eventually as they seek to destroy "the enemy without." Aum also illustrates the increasing reliance of terrorist groups on chemical and biological means of destruction. Like so many institutions including our own government, these two antigovernment institutions, militia groups and Aum, readily lapse into being more sensitive to outsiders' faults than their own. They run the risk of self destruction as well as animosity from outsiders.

Chapter 4, *The Central Intelligence Agency and Lethal Violence*, is an historical account and commentary on a highly secretive organization, with its roots in World War II, that has extended its spying on and disruption of other nations to this day. It documents how institutions given governmental authorization to act in secrecy may destroy lives through their covert operations and undermine their own as well as other governments.

The CIA performed heroic duty as it responded to wartime exigencies, continued its seemingly needed covert work through the cold war, and now focuses largely on the considerable threat of international terrorism. But it also illustrates the dangers and damages wrought by compromising democracy, a compromise thought necessary to counter the destructiveness of more authoritarian nations, whether in hot or cold wars. Necessary or not, the CIA has engaged throughout the world in paraethical and sometimes virtually directly lethal activities, often with very limited accountability to even the U.S. government as well as to other nations. Thus, the CIA has sometimes exemplified the lawless, terroristic behavior it is supposed to counter.

The examples provided in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 suggest that both individual and institutional perpetrators of paraethical and outright lethal behavior