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The Ghost in the Machine Details

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From Reader Review The Ghost in the Machine for online ebook

Nuno says

Koestler makes some amazing arguments on the structure and evolution of life (really worth reading). He seems to be one of the pioneers behind some of the concepts that inspired multi-agent systems and artificial intelligence (from a philosophical standpoint).
Regardless of the great discussions and insight given by Koestler, his writing is sometimes peculiar (perhaps because it is from 1950s), which made it hard to understand and follow some parts of the book. I suspect however, that's mostly because of my own ignorance regarding several disciplines discussed in the book.

Dan says

Koestler himself is not a scientist, but he is very interested in science, and particularly in how the human mind works. In this book, Koestler explores on the intellectual, emotional and creative processes of the mind, employing ideas from such fields as psychology, biology, physics and art in an analysis of how we organize knowledge and how we think. Koestler’s writing is clear, and he employs both examples and diagrams to supply concreteness to his arguments.

David Balfour says

This is well worth reading but it's still a bit of a disappointment. The first book in the Act of Creation is one of my favourite books so I had high expectations for Ghost in the Machine and it begins very promisingly. Koestler's criticism of Behaviourism and his section on the 'Poverty of Psychology' are spot on. The Holon is an incredibly useful idea which I had already understood intuitively and it was a delight to see it explained so well. Things go downhill soon after, however. There's a very tedious section on evolution in the centre of the book; a lengthy tirade against the 'Darwinian orthodoxy' that proposes some odd Larmarckian nonsense. Reading this section, it occurred to me that as much as I love him, Koestler is an insufferable contrarian. He is admirably forward-thinking but also way too eager to dismiss rigid methodology and rationality in pursuit of the most grandiose, heretical ideas he can think of. It only sometimes pays off.

The final chapter is pretty odd. Koestler comes across as profoundly disillusioned with humankind. He thinks we are fundamentally flawed and bound to destroy ourselves. The only way out, he suggests, is to drug the population!

Adam says

I remember this book was very dense and academic (not scientifically so, but his writing style is pretty arch, if I remember correctly) but very interesting. It's either about neurobiology, psychology, or metaphysics, or all three. I recommend it, I think. And since I'm the only one so far to have written a review of it, you're just going to have to trust me.

Satish Bagal says

Arthur Koestler wrote literature and fiction in nineteen forties and early nineteen fifties. In late fifties he turned to science. In "The Ghost in the Machine" he concludes, and I feel he does so without much conviction, that the human race, owing to some faults/defects during evolution, may be marching to its early end.

Much has happened in science since Koestler wrote in the sixties and seventies. Indeed of late Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker very forcefully and convincingly argued that the human race as a whole has fared far better and has been evolving better and leaving violence much behind.

And yet Koestler's triology "The sleepwalkers", "The Act of Creation" and "The Ghost in the Machine" taken together broke a new path in the history of science: It led a direct assault on the reductionism and gave new hope to the young scientists in the seventies.

For more details you may refer to my longish blog with the following link.

http://satish-bagal.blogspot.in/2012/...

Satish Bagal

W.B. says

A nonpareil example of interdisciplinary writing. The year in the think tank for Koestler issued in an amazing book. The challenges to straightforward Darwinian evolution put forth by a man of letters are more cogent than those put forward by many better-trained scientists (true, he was utilitizing and synthesizing information gained directly from scientists in that think tank experiment). A missed classic. If the science he puts forward here is repeatable, this is going to be one of those examples where genius got mistaken as quaintness.

Tracy says

The Lay-Person’s view is that this book is incredible. It is fascinating, thought provoking, intriguing, and – from a perspective of the end of 2015 – the most frightening thing I have ever read.
I will admit that the content is dated; that the idea of mass psychopharmaceuticals (potentially in the drinking water) has a definite 1960’s feel. But removing suggestions that would have been perfectly natural during the 1960s counter-culture revolution, the rest is eye opening to say the least.
Most reviewers agree that the first ¾ of this book is solid. The research is fabulous; it is presented in a reader-friendly manner. I am not sure if I agree with the basic premise that the problems human beings face are related to the physical speed of our brain growth – but an hypothesis is simply an unproven idea; with this in mind, it is a plausible argument as presented in this book.
The part that had me reevaluating the way I see humanity was the end (just before the “cure” of mass doses of LSD). At this point, with the help of many other authors, Koestler predicts our current societal situations. Koestler explains why Trump has followers, why so many people want to carry guns everywhere they go, the flood of refugees around the world, Russian aggression in the Crimea, even the root causes of terrorism. I do not believe I would have been so moved by this book 10 years ago. Today though – it is a frightening reality

check – and it does not look good for our species.

Gaelan D'costa says

I intuitively agree with Arthur Koestler's organization of psychological, individual and sociological units into 'holons' which appear unified from one direction and distributed into separate pieces from the other.

I also agree with his summation that the integrative tendencies of man have, though necessary, produced far more upset in this world than the self-assertive tendencies of individuals.

The book is dated, so there are debatable assumptions that stem from eurocentrism, the continued existeance of the cold-war focus, and the idea that man's flows are an operational flaw can be 'fixed.' with some kind of technique or technology. While these may colour his conclusions they do not lessen the use of the intermediate model of behavior he constructs for descriptive (and not prescriptive) purposes.

John says

Chances are that brain-function knowledge has improved since the 60s when Koestler wrote this. But armed with what was known then, this book makes a strong scientific case for what Kurt Vonnegut always liked to say, that our biggest problem is that our brains are too big for our own good. Behind the scenes is Koestler's obsession with how someone as intelligent as himself could have been duped into being an active member of the Communist Party at the height of Stalin's purges, but I think that obsession makes the book better. Figuring out what's wrong with human development is literally a matter of life and death for him. Not a lighthearted read, but definitely worth it.

Marc says

Koestler examines the notion that the parts of the human brain-structure which account for reason and emotion are not fully coordinated.

This kind of deficiency may explain the paranoia, violence, and insanity that are central parts of human history, according to Koestler's challenging analysis of the human predicament.

Masterful . An excellent discussion of the pitfalls of Behaviorism and the many facets of biology, anthropology, and evolution.

Tony says

Koestler, Arthur. THE GHOST IN THE MACHINE. (1967). ***.
Koestler was born in Budapest in 1905 and spent his early career as a journalist. In the early 1930s he joined the Communist Party, but was soon disillusioned by the atrocities committed by Stalin. He resigned from the party and published a novel, “Darkness at Noon,” which decried the existence of a totalitarian ruling party.

The novel rocketed him to fame and he went on to devote the rest of his career to writing. He had a major interest in the various theories of psychology and behavior that were being developed at the time and wrote this book to refute the then popular concept of mind-body dualism. He was particularly against the current concepts put forth by Skinner and his school. In this treatise, Koestler also proposes the term “holon,” which better defines the role of the brain in human behavior. Although this book had great influence in its day, the theories advanced have since been incorporated into mainstream psychological thinking.

Mark Longo says

I'm a little torn on this one. At times, Koestler's brilliance dazzles, as when he describes his conception of "holons", Janus-faced part/holes ubiquitous in natural systems. His deconstruction of behaviorism is also quite entertaining, and devastating, though dated by now. And overall, the book is filled with piercing insights by a thoughtful and perceptive author. However, there's also a whole lot of crap in this book, just flat out nonsense, particularly as related to evolutionary theory. Perhaps many of these errors represent the state of the art in 1967, though from my limited readings of that era I don't think so. Koestler positions himself as a revolutionary thinker and it's always a gamble to step outside of the mainstream. My biggest disappointment with this book was with the rather trite and creepy advice Koestler gives us at the end to address his diagnosis of humanity's inherent "delusional" character.

Worth a read to see the historical genesis of a great word/concept (holon) and for some beautifully articulated scientific insights, but beware of copious factual quicksand.

Shelley says

I finally read this book after years of familiarity with just the title. I always thought it was a political book about the Soviet Union! I thought "the machine" was a reference to Stalin's Soviet machine and thought "the ghost" was a reference to the people who were someday going to rise up against the machine. I suppose I had these mistaken assumptions because of Koestler's book Darkness at Noon, which I did read years ago.

Anyway, I was surprised to find that Ghost in the Machine has nothing to do with politics or the Soviet Union! Well, perhaps indirectly, but the book is basically about science and psychology! It's actually quite well done and more detailed than most people probably understand about the subject. I was impressed by his scholarship and clarity of explanation. Considering the time it was written, he did well in making his critique. Of course, nowadays his critique is outdated, but there are certainly many people who have no idea about any of this and would still be informed by much of it.

Chrissy says

I have to start by pointing out a serious rift between why I was recommended this book and why I kept reading it: a philosophy major drunkenly trying to defend free will told me I might be impressed by the

book's arguments, and I took it as a challenge. I'd love to see an intelligent response to determinism, a sharp knife to poke at the thick skin of my convictions.

To be frank, I did not find that in this book.

Koestler's arguments against determinism are, to my perspective, peripheral to the bulk of his thesis, which is that evolution has landed man in a blind alley by giving him an exponential growth of cortex that he hasn't yet figured out how to use in concert with the older and more slowly developed subcortical structures. Yet the determinism arguments are treated as foundational in light of the strongly behaviourist tendencies of the scientific era against which he was battling. The result is that he ends up debating a macro-level stimulus-response caricature of determinism that few determinists today hold as sufficient-- a straw man by current standards but, sure, admirable and fairly unique for psychological science circa 1960. It could even be that such relentless (and at the least witty and delightful to read) attacks on behaviourism helped to open bright minds to the cognitive revolution, so we won't hold that against him. But we will hold it against that philosophy major for bringing a knife to a gunfight, and encourage him to read some newer books....

Much of the remainder was a fascinating read, however. Koestler takes us through evolutionary theory and hierarchical systems theory, tying the two together to look at the larger whole of humanity in terms of some evolutionary phenomena.

One of his focuses is on the "blind alley" in evolution, in which a species becomes overspecialized for its environment and then can't adapt properly to new changes in that environment. In the history of evolution, this has happened a number of times, but nature has a way of getting out of it: paedomorphism, basically extending the growth phase of development and evolving off younger forms of the species. This is a process that Koestler calls *reculer pour mieux sauter* (roughly: taking a step back to jump better), and it's one of the more interesting of the ideas he applies to other levels of the human hierarchical system. For example, he cites this process as the means to creativity in both art and science. Breakthroughs are obtained by breaking down the existing state of thought and working from older ideas in combination with new knowledge (and thus is hit upon the very reason I read old and outdated books like this one).

In a later thread of his theoretical mixology, Koestler takes a closer look at the structure of hierarchical systems, in which each element is both a whole on its level and a part of the level above it-- a duality which he calls a *holon* and which term is probably this book's most enduring contribution. A holon in a hierarchical system embodies a fundamental tension between integrative (i.e., parts of a whole) and self-assertive (i.e., each part is a whole in itself) tendencies. He not only explains humour, art, and science as lying along a continuous spectrum on this dimension, but also proposes that most of human woe can be explained by the dichotomy. Specifically, that whereas overexpression of the self-assertive tendency can lead to small scale violence, overexpression of the integrative tendency moves the behaviour one step up in the hierarchy and leads to large-scale violence. So nationalism, religion, cults, etc., are a submission of the "wholeness" of the part to the benefit of the larger whole, and lead to destruction on a broader scale. I'm not generally one for such broad theorizing, but I love this idea.

After hitting that broad and impressive peak, he reels the magnifying glass back down to the level of the individual human and argues that we've evolved into a sick blind alley that makes us prone to the delusions inherent in closed systems. A closed system doesn't behave hierarchically, but locks its parts into the part role and leaves the larger closed system the only whole, rejects opinions from outside the system, and so on. Whether these delusions are expressed in terms of mental illness or social illnesses like nationalism/religion, the result is the same and it is not good. Also generally on board with this idea, and at this point I began to develop expectations about where he was going with it...

And then suddenly the message begins a glorious spiral of WTF so far off the mark of the natural extension I'd extrapolated from the book's brilliant middle portion that it took me and my incredulity an entire two

weeks to read the last few chapters. Basically, Koestler sketches the need for a drug to "unlock the potentials of the underused cortex" by somehow allowing more distributed communication with subcortical structures, and thereby evading the closed system that amplifies the part/whole tension and leads to our madness as a species-- a madness defined by what he calls the absolute certainty of self-destruction by nuclear war. If the leaps in this synopsis are hard to follow, I'm sorry, but his elaboration doesn't do much better. The 1960's come through loud and clear in these pages, and it's such a pity that he ends on this note, to the tune of my repeating the word NOPE. Not to mention that in the same breath as he expounds on the virtues of such a drug, he deeply misunderstands Huxley's proposal for the virtues of hallucinogens. If there's an afterlife, I hope Mr. Huxley and Mr. Koestler have by now discussed, over magical heaven tea, that they completely agree about what drugs can and cannot do with the contents of a human brain, because wow what a misreading of Huxley. BUT I DIGRESS.

Take the last bit with a grain of salt and forgive Koestler the hubris of assigning a much-deplored relic of psychology's past as his arch-nemesis, and this is a profoundly interesting extrapolation of known scientific processes to new milieus, with at worst thought-provoking and at best insightful results. With the reality of those elements however, it's hard not to take the rest with at least a half-grain of the same salt. If one's foundational assumptions are outdated, it's difficult not to question the validity of anything built on them. Nevertheless, it was delicious and surprisingly far-ranging food for thought and I'm glad I got into a drunken debate with a philosophy major. Even though he's wrong.

Steve says

Well, that was an interesting ride. Koestler is definitely what I would call an armchair academic. Well read, fun to talk to at parties, full of fascinating ideas ... not quite sure quite sure if the ideas are right though, but that's okay, they are just so interesting to talk to.

I read this book because I love Ghost in the Shell and wanted to read the book which inspired, at least the title. Imagine my surprise when the book mentions that the title came from Prof. Gilbert's book, The Concept of the Mind. Not much of the Koestler book has to do with the anime though. The description of a surgery where people describe a movement of the body not caused by their mind, that was certainty an inspiration, as well as the very central idea of a 'ghost.' A mind which exists outside of the brain. The way Koestler at the end of the book shares his solution (won't spoil it because it was a bit of a shocker to me), speaks to that desire for rapid change to overcome humanity.

Koestler is a fun writer, with a nice dose of humour and sarcasm. He jumps around so much though, that it makes it difficult to see his logical progression of thoughts. It feels more like, rather than wanting to convince us of a claim, he just wanted to talk for as long as possible on every subject he could. The section on evolution I found the most interesting. Will keep his ideas in mind, even if I have a gut level reaction that he is wrong. He seems to be implying a teleological model to evolution, which made me cautious.

The only real critique (beyond whether he is right or wrong because I am not knowledgeable in all the fields he mentions) is that his perspective is pretty eurocentric, in that old aristocratic sense. He doesn't speak as a human from all races, but specifically as a European academic. At one point he says, "The fast breeders in Asia, Africa and Latin America are by nature the least amenable to disciplined family planning." Besides being a very questionable and racist statement, it goes against almost the entire spirit of the book, in how scientific developments can change attitudes and ways of living. I feel like he calling every non-white people a marsupial with a statement like that (A reference to the book).
