

# A BRIEF CONCEPTUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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# A BRIEF CONCEPTUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

**Steven James Bartlett**

**T**here is more to life than the life of the mind, but the latter has been the most important part of my life, and here is a general map of the territory I've explored and a few of the thoughts I've had about it.

My parents' lives were devoted to cultivating the inner and outer realities of writing and art. They led a gypsy existence dedicated to creative work, which gave me the opportunity during my childhood to live in many parts of the U.S. and Mexico, attending more than a dozen schools before high school. I experienced the many moves as liberating and an adventure, but also began to see clear hints of the darker side of human nature in the form it so often takes of bullying the "new kid." This phenomenon proved to be a U.S. specialty, not found in the Mexico of those years, a fact that made me aware how an appetite for meanness and violence can be encouraged by one society and not by another.

Very early, before I was in my teens, I developed a concern to understand dysfunctional human thinking and behavior, and wished to find solutions for the shortcomings and limitations I saw in many others. This interest led me to begin an independent research project in high school, searching for new antibiotics, for I saw that antibiotics comprise one way in which some pathologies can be combated. This project extended well into my college years, leaving me fond memories of working in pleasant solitude late into the evening hours in the microbiology lab, the only student trusted with his own key.

During two of my three undergraduate years I majored in physics, which I felt might be a more direct path to understanding the world in clear and crisp terms. But for me this was an unsatisfactory experience, for two reasons: I soon realized that physicists were users of the tools of mathematics and of established strategies of investigation, but were not especially concerned to understand those tools in depth or to question those strategies. And, secondly, I became aware that research in physics has become a "team effort," and as a person who experiences something akin to nausea whenever he hears the word 'team', I decided to look elsewhere for a professional center.

Philosophy of science beckoned, and I responded by transplanting a commitment to independent study and the elimination of pathologies by reinvesting it in the means that I thought might be offered by philosophy. Specifically this meant, for me, an interest in identifying ways in which human thinking goes wrong when undertaken by philosophers generally, and in particular by those philosophers who think about science. And I saw philosophy as offering a profession and way to earn a living while it allowed one to pay attention to more important things.

Hermann Hesse's observation, in his "Conjectural Biography," expressed this attitude eloquently:

I consider reality to be the thing one need concern oneself about least of all, for it is, tediously enough, always at hand while more beautiful and necessary things demand our attention and care. Reality is that which one must not under any circumstances worship and revere, for it is chance, the refuse of life. And it is in no wise to be changed, this shabby, consistently disappointing reality, except by our denying it and proving in the process that we are stronger than it.<sup>1</sup>

Such thoughts had an appeal to me at a time before U.S. society and education had succeeded in raising Usefulness onto a pedestal, a time before the onset of a debilitating near-sightedness that could no longer see and understand higher values and the appropriately named higher education that would communicate them, before university education had become desirable only because it provides its graduates with access to better-paying jobs. By the time this mind-limiting myopia fully developed, I had lost interest in trying to span the widening gap between my values and those of today's students—but this is another story, which in a mathematical spirit, I'll reduce through a footnote to a problem already treated.<sup>2</sup>

As I made my way through graduate studies in philosophy, I minored in psychology, drawn by a desire to weld both disciplines in a new form of philosophical therapy, which I called *conceptual therapy*, and for which there would prove to be unexpectedly ample opportunities for its application. The principal target of intellectual suppression is always the creative mind. The targeting by conservatively entrenched philosophers in my department at the University of California was no exception. To find a dissertation director competent and sufficiently open to consider the new direction for philosophy that I proposed, I needed to learn French and leave the U.S. to study in Paris with Paul Ricoeur—perhaps one must be an original thinker to be willing to encourage others to be. It was a good decision; Ricoeur had an ability to enter into a way of thinking that was significantly alien to his own, and yet provide an atmosphere of inspiration and constructive guidance.

Since by the time I completed my dissertation Ricoeur had accepted a visiting professorship at the Institut Catholique de Louvain, Belgium, members of the

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<sup>1</sup> Hesse, Hermann (1954/1925). *My life: A conjectural biography* (Denver Lindley, Trans.). In William Phillips & Philip Rahv (Eds.), *Avon book of modern writing no. 2*. New York: Avon Books, 55-72; quotation from p. 67. First published as "Kurzgefasster Lebenslauf," *Neue Rundschau*, 1925. Also published as "Life story briefly told" in Hermann Hesse, *Autobiographical Writings* (Theodore Ziolkowski, Ed.; Denver Lindley, Trans.). New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971, 43-62 (this translation is somewhat different).

<sup>2</sup> See my "The Loss of Permanent Realities: Demoralization of University Faculty in the Liberal Arts," *Methodology and Science*, Vol. 27, No. 1, 1994, 25-39, and "The Psychology of Faculty Demoralization in the Liberal Arts: Burnout, Acedia, and the Disintegration of Idealism," *New Ideas in Psychology*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 1994, 277-289. Reworked, supplemented, and updated, these form two chapters in my book, *Normality Does Not Equal Mental Health: The Need to Look Elsewhere for Standards of Good Psychological Health* (Praeger, 2011).

Louvain faculty were asked to act as members of my doctoral committee: mathematical logician Jean Ladrière and existentialist Alphonse de Waelens. I believe Ladrière may have understood my technical and involuted dissertation better than the others; poor de Waelens, I think, accepted Ricoeur's and Ladrière's judgment since he was probably completely at sea.

For about seven years afterwards, I tried to find ways to develop my approach to conceptual therapy within a largely phenomenological framework. But the top-heavy, often intentionally obscure language and a set of concepts drawn even from the more rigorous tradition of phenomenology proved to be too much of a dead weight. I gradually minimized the phenomenological side and developed a metatheory of reference that presented, I believed, a clearer understanding of the fundamental problems and their solution.<sup>3</sup>

During this period, my interests in clinical psychology returned and I enjoyed three years of postdoctoral study, concomitant with teaching, while at Saint Louis University. In addition to attending graduate courses and seminars, I worked with clinical psychologist Thomas Maloney as his co-therapist, an experience that led me to write a guide for general readers (*When You Don't Know Where to Turn: A Self-diagnosing Guide to Counseling and Therapy*, Contemporary Books/McGraw-Hill, 1987), to help them find an approach to therapy most likely to be of benefit to them, based on studies of psychotherapeutic effectiveness.<sup>4</sup>

This book marked a shift of direction in my interests, research, and publication, from philosophy to clinical psychology. There were two reasons for this shift: First, I felt deep dissatisfaction with changes in higher education (see footnote 2) that were intertwined with a wholesale lowering of the average ability level, preparation, personal and intellectual values of today's college students.<sup>5</sup> Second, I felt an equally deep dissatisfaction with the general tenor, aims, and scope of interest of recent academic philosophy, which in my view reflects a nearly complete loss of concern for conceptual rigor with, at the same time, a narrowing of attention upon the miniscule. I perceived both of these phenomena as psychologically based, and since I

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<sup>3</sup> A paper, "Self-reference, Phenomenology, and Philosophy of Science," published in the Dutch journal *Methodology and Science: Interdisciplinary Journal for the Empirical Study of the Foundations of Science and Their Methodology*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1980, pp. 143-167, describes how I made the transition from a scientifically-oriented phenomenological approach to what I felt then, and continue to believe now, is a more exact and proof-based method that seeks to identify and eliminate conceptual pathologies.

<sup>4</sup> See "The Problem of Psychotherapeutic Effectiveness," *Methodology and Science*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 1990, pp. 75-86. The electronic version of this paper, available as an open access publication, includes a 2011 Afterword that summarizes the conclusions I reached concerning this issue.

<sup>5</sup> See "Barbarians at the Door: A Psychological and Historical Profile of Today's College Students," *Methodology and Science*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 1993, 18-40, published in the Netherlands and also concurrently in the U.S. under the same title in *Modern Age*, Vol. 35, No. 4, Summer, 1993, 296-310. (Readers of this version of the paper are asked to read the "Note to Our Readers" printed in this journal in Vol. 36, No. 3, page 303, in which *Modern Age* expressed regret for "numerous and substantive changes and abridgments...to which the author had not consented," and offers to send readers upon request a reprint of the text as originally written.) A revised, supplemented, and updated account may be found in my book, *Normality Does Not Equal Mental Health: The Need to Look Elsewhere for Standards of Good Psychological Health* (Praeger, 2011).

could do nothing to change them, I chose to study them in order better to understand them.

I think, to a modest degree, I succeeded in doing this from the standpoint of clinical psychology. In the process, I became specifically interested in what I've called *internal limitations of human psychology*, a subject that has brought together my work in philosophy and my interests in psychology. Among these psychological limitations that form the internal structure of so many people, I wanted to answer a question I had had since a small boy: Why is it that so many people are willing—often with passionate enthusiasm—to harm others, and often themselves in the process? And so for much of a decade, I researched the varied expressions of human evil and then wrote *The Pathology of Man* (Charles C. Thomas, 2005). It was the first study that could claim a measure of genuine comprehensiveness in understanding why people engage in destructiveness, aggression, and cruelty without the need for much encouragement. I think I answered the question, at least for me, that had burned in my mind since childhood.

The consequence of having devoted so many years to a study of human shortcomings has of course made me more keenly aware of them—and just as strongly aware, by contrast, of that special human minority that has achieved so much during human history, both in terms of creative accomplishment and in terms of the rarity of high individual moral development.

The next area in which I became interested in internal human psychological limitation has been the psychology of clinical psychologists and psychiatrists themselves. Little research has been done relating to this meta-subject, and little written. As I studied this area I saw its kinship with the psychology of peer review and editorial bias, also little-researched. The two species of psychology (of clinical psychologists and psychiatrists, on the one hand, and of peer reviewers and editors, on the other) have acted in a self-reinforcing way so as to foster a consensus-based understanding—with little basis in science—of both dysfunctional and good mental health. This, then, became the topic of my book, *Normality Does Not Equal Mental Health: The Need to Look Elsewhere for Standards of Good Psychological Health* (Praeger, 2011).

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Now, as I all-too-suddenly find myself in what for most people are one's "retirement years," my study is filled to overflowing with many hundreds of pages of notes and folders relating to intended research and writing projects. Only time and the limitations imposed by reality will tell how many of these can make the transition from concept to reality.