

## AVOIDANCE AND MASTERY: AN INTERACTIONAL VIEW OF PHOBIAS

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All neurotic symptoms have as their object the task of safeguarding the patient's self-esteem and thereby also the style of life into which he has grown.

—ALFRED ADLER (1, p. 263)

A deeper understanding of the phenomena which we classify as mental illness depends more on the development of a broadly based science of human nature than it does on the specialized study of "psychopathology." In order for mankind to benefit fully from this science, the contributions, understanding, and application of it must transcend specialized or disciplinary boundaries (2). It is to the spirit of this ecumenicity that this contribution to the theory of phobic behavior is dedicated.

Phobias are generally defined as fearful and avoiding responses to apparently harmless objects, situations, or actions, or as exaggerated fears of relatively harmless objects, situations, or actions. Prior to the writings of Sigmund Freud, they were thought to be caused by subtle cerebral degeneration (11). Freud's explanation of phobias (as of the neurotic process in general) was rooted in a conception of human nature as fundamentally conative and driven (10). According to his view, which has been widely accepted in psychiatry, human nature is primarily sexual and aggressive and is repressed, controlled, and sublimated by social training and social structure. Avoidances, therefore, are considered to be secondary and defensive and can be analyzed and reduced to sexual and aggressive strivings; in fact, the more vigorous the avoidances, the stronger the drives which generate them are presumed to be.

According to psychoanalytic theory, phobias are the result of the repression, transformation, and displacement of aggressive and sexual drives (9). The motive force for the symptom is the anxiety which is associated with the belief that punishment (castration and loss of love) would result if the forbidden impulses were expressed. The

phobic symptom represents a symbolic and defensive avoidance of the unacceptable wish and the unpleasant consequences of its enactment.

The importance of drives in psychoanalytic theory would seem, on the face of it, properly to place human psychology in a biological perspective. However, the view that animal behavior is primarily governed by aggressive or seeking instincts is contradicted by the facts of evolutionary biology in general, and of human behavior in particular. The concept of the instinctual basis of behavior places undue emphasis on the organism, by attributing to it a primary nature which is relatively independent of its relationship to environment. It thus ignores a major theme of Darwinian biology, namely, that animal behavior is ecological; that is, it is to be understood in terms of its interaction with environment.<sup>1</sup> Further, it assumes that this primary nature is fundamentally positive or aggressive, while in fact, there are three possible reactions of all matter, both living and non-living, towards its surroundings: approaching (or aggressive); repulsion (or avoiding); and neutral (or indifferent). Each reaction depends both on the properties of the organism and the properties of the external world *in interaction with each other*.

It is the purpose of this paper to present such an interactional view of phobias. In their general character, phobias constitute one of the above three universal types of reactivity: avoidance. In their most differentiated form, they are seen only in human beings as the clinical entity with which we are familiar. In order to classify and understand phobias properly, we must conceptualize them in a general evolutionary scheme of animal reactivity.

#### THE EVOLUTIONARY STAGES OF AVOIDANCE REACTIONS

Leslie A. White, an anthropologist, has classified reactivity or "minding" into four stages (19). While I shall briefly describe these stages, my focus will be on avoidance reactions. The reader should consult White's essay for a fuller discussion.

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<sup>1</sup>This major theme of evolutionary biology has strongly influenced modern thought. It is an explicit premise in the works of the pragmatists and humanists such as Wm. James, J. Dewey, F. C. S. Schiller, G. H. Mead, and their symbolic interactionist successors in social psychology. It is also a major theme in the writings of the phenomenologists and existentialists. In psychiatry, A. Adler, H. S. Sullivan, K. Horney, E. Fromm and other adherents to socially oriented psychology have wittingly or unwittingly adopted this Darwinian principle. Cf. particularly to Adler's statement: "We cannot imagine a psychic life which is isolated. We can only imagine a psychic life bound up with its environment . . ." (2, p. 28).

*Subhuman Avoidance Reactions*

According to White's scheme, the most basic type of reactivity refers to matter. It is the attraction, repulsion, or neutrality of matter to matter, or matter to energy. Avoidance phenomena at this level are illustrated by "phobic" chemicals or electromagnetic repulsion.

The simplest avoidance reaction of living systems (White's Type 1) is the tropistic or reflex response which depends upon the intrinsic (physical) properties of both the organism and the stimulus. This type of reaction presumably occurs in all living systems, for example in the paramecium's withdrawal from an electrical field or a noxious chemical, and the reflex withdrawal of the singed human hand from flame.

The second stage (Type II) is characterized by the conditioned reflex. Just as a dog may be conditioned to salivate reflexively to (or approach) a bell which has been presented simultaneously with and then substituted for fragrant food, so he may be trained to avoid reflexively a stimulus which has been presented simultaneously with and then substituted for one which is intrinsically repulsive, for instance an electric shock. This type of avoidance is built upon Type I reactivity, except that the organism has the added capacity to respond to a stimulus independently of its intrinsic properties. This gains the organism a flexibility and modifiability of its response which is different in kind (rather than degree) from Type I. This capability may be found in a presumably wide, but indeterminate range of species. Modern behaviorism and behavior therapy are based on variations of this classical model of the conditioned reflex. The most important characteristic of this type of response is that the organism does not actively engineer the substitution of the conditioned stimulus.

In Type III reactivity, the organism reacts to two or more stimuli by actively relating them to one another. For instance, just as a monkey may employ a stick to gather-in bananas which are out of his reach, so he may climb a nearby box in order to avoid a snake in his cage. Type III reactivity is like Type I and unlike Type II in that the response is to the intrinsic properties of the stimuli; it is unlike Type I and like Type II in that more than one stimulus is involved; and it is unlike both Type I and II in that the relationship to the stimuli is determined by the organism as an active unit rather than by genetic properties, intra-organismic mechanisms, an experimenter, or chance. With this type of reactivity, permanent, fixed, and stable modes of response are replaced by responses which are more flexible and situa-

tionally modifiable. Its occurrence is restricted to the mammalian kingdom.

#### *Human Avoidance Conduct*

Type IV, or symbolic reactivity, is specifically human and is the basis for all of those qualities by which man has been characterized (18). The simplest example of this stage of minding is symbol formation in which the organism actively relates two or more stimuli to each other independently of their intrinsic properties: that is to say, arbitrarily. Upon this basic design culture and society, myth (shared fictions), and character (personal style) are elaborated.

The employment of one stimulus to represent another is called symbolizing or symbolization; and the stimulus employed for this purpose is called a symbol. Anything whatever that can be perceived is eligible for this use. The relationship between the symbol user (the person), the symbol, and its use is a relationship of meaning (12). The capacity to symbolize enables the human animal to react to his own movements (and those of other persons) not in terms of their intrinsic properties, but in terms of their meanings which depend on their connection with other symbols past (remembered), present (perceived), and future (anticipated). It is this capacity which transforms bodily motion into conduct, antecedents into history, and ends into purposes. It is this capacity which frees the human being from driving causes and immediately impinging stimuli, and sparks him with the situational flexibility that is choice and the fictional variety that is culture.<sup>2</sup> As we climb the evolutionary scale we may observe that with the increase in flexible reactivity there is a corresponding decrease in the automatic reactivity of instinct.

Type IV avoidances must be construed as symbolic: as having their basis in shared and individual meanings. Taboos, for example, are culturally shared avoidance patterns which prohibit certain kinds of action. Anything which can be given meaning (any material object in the universe) is eligible to be placed under taboo; it can become a culturally shared phobic object which is invested with the significance of danger and is therefore feared and avoided. Freud once suggested that the similarity between taboos and infantile zoophobias is "rendered possible or facilitated by the circumstance that inborn traces of a

<sup>2</sup>It should be noted that the endowments which make Type IV reactivity possible also add dimensions to Type III reactivity, namely the capacity for retention and anticipation which form the basis for the scientific understanding of the intrinsic regularities and predictabilities of the external world.

totemistic mode of thinking can still be activated at this tender age" (9, p. 32). Animal phobias, however, are not regressions to inborn "primitive" traits but are the idiosyncratic expressions of what were once shared social meanings. The similarity between taboos and phobias is based on the human capacity for symbolic avoidances and not on a genetically transmitted proclivity for totemism. The difference between them is that taboos have a common public significance, while phobias have an individual and private significance. Phobias and taboos share the general features of simpler forms of symbolic reactivity: the relationship between the stimuli is independent of their intrinsic properties (that is to say it is not one of cause and effect, but one of symbolic connection); and it is dependent on the activity of the organism.

Like all other animals, the human animal lives in a world of mechanisms and hard objects to which he must be fitted, or must learn to deal with, in order to insure personal survival and the perpetuation of the species. But *Homo sapiens* alone also lives in a symbolic world in which his success or failure as a *person*, and his progress or decline as a *civilization* depend on his mastery of meanings: All depends upon his acquiring the skill to suit his behavior to an environment of social symbols and fictions, and actively and intelligently to manipulate such an environment. While human conduct occurs in the context of the structure and function of the body, this context provides the raw materials rather than the form, style, and meaning of conduct (6), including avoidance. Bodily events, however lawful or capricious they may be, are without socially relevant significance until that significance is imposed upon them by human design. Yet the human organism is a unity whose encounter with the world is a total organismic experience involving physiological function (Type I), a complicated process of conditioning (Type II), as well as the active mastery of patterns of social action (Types III and IV).

#### THE THREE TYPES OF THREAT TO HUMAN EXISTENCE

The multi-dimensionality of human nature is associated with three general threats to its existence which are based as much on that nature as on the external sources of danger. First, there is the inevitability of the death of the organism as a biological being. While this fate is shared by all living things, only humans can anticipate it, give it meaning, and contrive instrumental and symbolic means for its avoidance.

Second, there is the possibility of conflict with the group to which one is socially bonded and from which one derives his identity as a person. The result of this conflict may be derision, punishment, or banishment from the group, acts which are often tantamount to social and even biological death. Psychoanalysts customarily link the subjective fear of the first two threats under the single heading of castration anxiety: the fear of punishment, concretized with respect to the genitals, for the violation of social rules of conduct.

The third threat to the creature of fictions is the possibility of the loss of meaning. As has been indicated, the narrow sense of meaning refers to the relationship between the symbol user, the symbol, and its use. In a broader socio-historical context, it refers to the relationship between personal identity, the systems of socio-cultural fictions, and the patterns of individual behavior by means of which they intertwine. The loss of meaning thus refers to the loss of a coherent symbolic framework — dramaturgically, the loss of the central elements of the plot which binds past, present, and future into the unified design within which life's action can be sustained.

The fear of this loss has been called separation anxiety because for the relatively helpless child, life's meaning is monopolized by his parents, the loss of whom would deprive him of the central reference points for his experience. However, this paradigm of separation is only one component of the larger anxiety about meaning-loss. Anything which has meaning can be lost: objects, persons, modes of relating, parts of the body, goals, or causes. The more central that meaning is to the individual's life style, the more devastating the loss of it will be. The more limited the individual's range of meanings (or plots), the greater his anxiety will be about the possibility of their loss; the more transcendent and enduring his meanings, the less he will be threatened by the possibility of their loss. It is from this desire for eternal meanings (or everlasting plots) and not from the submissive child in man in search of a dominating father that the belief in God springs.

In order to maintain a satisfactory life the individual must be capable of mastering these threats. First, he must be able to maintain biological life, either by means of automatic bodily mechanisms or with the aid of medical intervention. Second, he must master the rules of deportment which are required by his society; this does not imply strict obedience and conformity with them, but rather a consciousness of them and the capacity to resolve conflicts decisively

whether they be social or intrapersonal. Third, he must live in (and contribute to the creation of) a society which provides adequate meaning for its members; and as an individual, he must develop the skills necessary to mould and maintain meaning for himself.

#### AVOIDANCE AS A TECHNIQUE OF MASTERY

Avoidance is as necessary a component to these three forms of mastery as is execution. From the physiological perspective, it is important to the maintenance of life that reflex and conditioned avoidance mechanisms function properly; it is also vital that certain known dangers to life and health be avoided, for instance, poisonous foods, precipitous cliffs, and penetrating missiles.

From the perspective of social conduct, an individual must not only master the skills of social communication, etiquette, and work, he must also learn self-restraint, control, and discipline. Acts of commission and acts of avoidance are both included in the catalogue of obligations and prerogatives which a child learns during his socialization. Failures in either may create conflict between the child and his parents or the individual and his society which may result in anxiety, guilt and punishment. Success in either is likely to bring a warm sense of self-esteem, mastery, and social reward (3).

Finally, avoidance is as necessary to the preservation and nurturance of meaning as is positive action. For the animal whose unique nature is forged out of significance, the threat of meaninglessness can be more devastating than even death or social exile. The avoidance of meaninglessness is therefore the supreme task of human life.

Psychoanalytic orthodoxy postulates that avoidances are defenses against the dual instinctual thrusts of aggression and sexuality, and that it is their infiltration into all areas of life, which must be followed by their repression, transformation, and sublimation, that accounts for the ubiquity of inhibition. However, avoidances are not reactions against pre-existing evil. Avoidance and evil are the dialectical co-creators of one another: That which is to be avoided is given the significance of evil, and the existence of evil signals the desirability of avoidance. The distinction between good and evil, manifested in conduct by prescriptive and prohibitive rules, is a prerequisite of social life.

Avoidance is therefore an essential ingredient of all social conduct and has equal status with the perpetrated deed. Its social value derives not in the recoil from evil instincts, but in the definition of evil,

which when it is shared, contributes to the creation of the social bond. Avoidances thus have a social value which is independent of the reality of the evil they oppose. They may also serve as social strategies which, for instance, in the form of nonviolent passive resistance may promote social reform, sympathy, or self-aggrandizement. Or, they may serve to enhance the sense of mastery and self-esteem by demonstrating conformity with rules of conduct that marks one as deserving the praise of important others (current or "internalized" authority figures) for a job well and obediently done. In fact, avoidances are often more conducive to a sense of mastery (4) than positive action: First, because in a collective society, the majority of rules tend to be prohibitive, rather than prescriptive (14); second, because errors of omission are usually considered to be lesser sins than errors of commission; and finally, because, since the activity to be avoided is assumed to be harmful, the sense of safety from evil can be accomplished without the risks of direct confrontation.

#### EXAGGERATED AVOIDANCE—PHOBIA

Avoidances can become prominent and distracting characteristics of behavior in three ways: They can dominate the life style; they can dominate a particular sector of behavior; or they can become specific and caricatured avoidances of the type we designate as phobias.

##### *The Avoiding Life Style*

The human organism, as a creature of meanings, can be taught or become convinced that he ought to be an avoider; that effort, assertion and encounter are evil and that repose, caution and detachment are desirable (1, 16). Avoidance can become the mark of an individual's life style not as a defense against the seeking "instincts," but by his learning to believe that the social world belongs to others who do not look approvingly at his stamping his mark on it. Such a person may become so radically encrusted with self-inhibiting and negating armor that by refusing to risk danger, he may lose himself as a growing self-altering, participating human being (17). Such a person is the paradigm of inferiority, and suffers such a profound sense of guilt about self-affirmation that he may feel himself to be an alien form in a strange and hostile world.

##### *Patterned Inhibition*

Avoidances or inhibitions may dominate certain areas of behavior rather than the entire life style. For instance in a society with vestiges



of puritanism, young girls may be taught that sex is evil and dirty and at best a marital duty which is to be discharged with haste and a minimum of pleasure. Later in life, such girls may de-emphasize their sexuality and avoid physical relationships with men, including their husbands. This inhibition may generalize to other areas of their lives which are tinged with sexual meanings such as in the display of tenderness, warmth and affection. Yet, such persons may be aggressive and assertive in other ways, for instance in the pursuit of a career.

#### *Phobia as Mastery of Fear of Death or Injury*

Exaggerated avoidance devices may be employed to increase the individual's sense of mastery over danger when his life, social relations, or meaning are in jeopardy. Dollard and Miller write about the combat pilot who developed a phobia of airplanes after a near-fatal mission (7). By an exaggerated avoidance of the machine which he so closely associated with his demise he could both symbolically and actually (by being grounded) master his fear of death which had reached such disastrous proportions. It is misleading to explain this phobia as the result of conditioning, for while it required learning (i.e., antecedent experiences) for its accomplishment, it was also perpetrated and purposive. The conditioned avoidance of a stimulus which is associated with pain is the combined result of antecedent experiences and automatic, physiological mechanisms. However, this flier tried to avoid death, an event which he had not experienced and which requires a discriminating symbolic capacity to anticipate. He associated death with airplanes rather than with noise, turbulence, height or the myriad of other stimuli which impinged on him at the zenith of his fear; airplanes were the single stimulus of all of these the avoidance of which could be expected to preserve his life. His phobia thus must be construed as an active attempt to enhance his feeling of mastery over the threat of death, by avoiding a selected stimulus to which the meaning of death was ascribed.

#### *Phobia as Mastery of Guilt and Social Conflict*

Exaggerated avoidances may also occur in situations in which it is difficult for an individual to avoid conflict and hence, the anxiety and guilt associated with it. In a socially strained society, many activities may be both prohibited and recommended; or they may be prohibited at one stage of life and recommended at another, without a clear and meaningful rite of passage to mark the transition. An in-

dividual may thus want to do what he ought to avoid, or he may want to avoid what he is obliged to do; he is then faced with the task of wanting to practice and avoid the same activity. Under these circumstances, the unskilled social performer will either experience anxiety and guilt for violating a taboo, or he will feel a lack of fulfillment and a longing for a desirable and pleasurable activity.

For instance, a patient who had been taught to avoid sex and also to be a compliant and dutiful wife was confronted with a dramatic emergency. Her solution to submit blandly to her husband's sexual advances on the condition that immaculate cleanliness be maintained was a virtual stroke of creative genius. She avoided the sexual act symbolically by avoiding the pollution which she took for its major quality; this avoidance, in turn, placed preconditions on the sexual act which were so inconvenient and irritating to her husband that his spontaneity, passion and patience were quickly exhausted and his demands on her gradually ceased; and as a result, the requirement to participate in sex was radically diminished without her violating the obligations of her wifely duty. The price of this strategy came high with her husband's infidelity, but she repressed the connection of this to her eccentricity and thus could shift the blame for her broken marriage fully to her husband.

Or, it may happen that conflict is impossible to avoid. For instance, a mother may teach her child the importance of honoring his parents and avoiding any action which might hurt them. However, she might also unpredictably accuse him of wounding her deeply when he engages in assertive and independent actions. He is thus placed in the position of not being able to avoid hostile behavior towards his mother because *anything* he does may be defined by her as an instance of it. He stands perpetually guilty of crimes for which the convicting evidence is his accuser's suffering. Such a person might fashion an exaggerated fear and avoidance of doing harm to living things such as insects and animals, as well as persons. At least then he could convince himself and perhaps others, that he is not a mean and destructive person who deserves to be reviled and punished; and he can maintain a semblance of self-esteem which is derived from his caricatured goodness.

Another example of this predicament is the case of Little Hans (10) who was given contradictory instructions for the use of his penis: he was warned not to touch it under the threat of castration and he was simultaneously encouraged to urinate by himself. Unable to comply

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with his parents' expectations, Hans attributed the qualities of the penis symbolically to horses: they had the largest organs he had ever seen and were also, at the turn of the century, equally as difficult to avoid, at least on the streets. The avoidance of horses, sustained by the fear that his encounter with them (touching) would lead to injury (castration) enabled Hans at least to be symbolically obedient to his parents' prohibitions. It thus, served to bolster his threatened self-esteem and gave him a sense of mastering the rules of conduct.

*Phobia as Mastery of Threat of Loss of Meaning*

Finally, phobias may be employed by a person who finds it difficult or impossible to avoid changes in his life which would radically alter familiar meanings. Perhaps the best example of this is the small child who develops a school phobia when he is suddenly thrust from his habitual home surroundings into a strange school environment. The phobia serves as an exaggerated attempt to avoid new and unfamiliar meanings and to preserve meanings to which he had become accustomed.

PHOBIAS AS SOCIAL PROBLEMS

When an individual's life, social acceptance, or meanings are threatened, the forward momentum of his action is obstructed and his sense of self-esteem and mastery are jeopardized. Yet, life must continue. When the symbolic animal is balked by his own fictions, he may transform or distort them in order to permit the continued flow of action, no matter how grotesque or eccentric the new fiction may become. Of the great variety of fictional transformations of which man is capable, two lie on the reactivity continuum: There is the counter-phobic maneuver in which the individual charges ahead in the zealous, indiscriminating confrontation with the dangerous activity; and there is the phobic maneuver in which the individual retreats in an exaggerated avoidance of a threat, or of a symbolized representative of it, or of an activity which is a prerequisite of it.

Phobias need not be viewed as defenses against drives which obstinately press for expression. They are desperate attempts to maintain a sense of mastery when the individual would otherwise be confronted with anxiety or meaninglessness. By investing something which is possible to avoid with the dangerous qualities of something which is more difficult (or impossible) to avoid, the danger can be

symbolically controlled.<sup>3</sup> For finite man, the dangers to life, social function, and meaning are ubiquitous. Indeed, we may postulate that the greater the inability to master these dangers, the more frequent and exaggerated the resort to phobic avoidances will be; conversely, the greater the sense of mastery, the less the need for phobias will be. Thus, childhood phobias are so common as to be considered a natural stage in growth and development; and while superstitions and private, idiosyncratic fears are common among adults, they tend to diminish where science and education replace the mastery of magic with the mastery of practical knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

For the most part, phobias are neither conspicuous nor inconvenient; often they are thought of as no more than personal idiosyncracies. However, the woman who fears to walk on public avenues, the child who is terrified of his school, the businessman who dreads his automobile—these people live under conditions in which it is difficult to discharge life's daily routines and obligations; they create burdens for themselves and others which lead to conflict and the disruption of affectionate, cooperative living. Once phobias have been instituted as devices to sustain a meaningful existence, they become social actions themselves which are then subject to a social evaluation upon which the worth and esteem of their creators depends. It is out of the desire to remedy the intolerable conditions caused by the phobia that medical or psychiatric aid is sought (13). It is not the phobia itself, but its undesirable social consequences that marks it as an "illness"; judgments about these consequences are moral and not medical in nature and depend as much on the evaluations of others as on the phobic individual's own verdict that his life is unsatisfactory (15).

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR THERAPY

Phobias are, in their fundamental characteristics a function of living systems; in the differentiated form in which they are identified as a clinical entity, they are exclusively human. They are responses

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<sup>3</sup>Mastery by Type IV symbolic substitution is not restricted to avoidances. It may be also accomplished by the fetishization of objects such as amulets or baby blankets. In such instances, an object or situation which is desirable, but difficult or impossible to approach (or control) is symbolized by a substitute which is more available.

<sup>4</sup>Ernest Becker has suggested that since the human condition is finite and therefore ultimately helpless in the face of destruction, every person may require at least one phobia as a repository of symbolic mastery (5).

to problems between the individual and his symbolic environment in which the well-being of the organism is perceived to be in jeopardy.

The environment of cultural fictions is of man's own making, although individual men may become enslaved to it. Although the victimization of man by culture *appears* similar in certain respects to the conditioning of animals, it differs in the important respect that man, unlike animals, possesses the potentiality and the capacity actively to master the environment to which he will react. To the extent that mankind cannot negotiate that environment; to the extent that it baffles, paralyzes and impedes its survival and well-being; then to that extent mankind is the instrument of its own agony. In the long run then, the reduction of disabling phobias (and the reduction of all sociogenic "mental illness") depends on the engineering of a social design which will facilitate instead of impede the self-mastery of its members. This will require not only the forging of more consistent and coherent social institutions, but also the education of every person to a commanding perspective of cultural meanings so that he can creatively and intelligently deal with conflicts and the threat of meaninglessness.

The opposite tendency has become increasingly popular in psychology and psychiatry, particularly with respect to the problem of phobias. It has become common to view phobias as the result of unfortunate conditioning, as Type II reactions, for which the remedy is a process of deconditioning (7, 8, 21). Behavior therapy may be the best possible choice of treatment for certain persons in certain situations, but this determination ought not be based solely on its efficiency (20). The question of what is best for a man or for mankind is at least as much a moral matter as it is a technical one. A psychology which presumes human nature to be essentially instinctual or essentially conditioned, neglects that uniquely human symbolic capacity which is the basis for moral judgment. It promises only to improve the results of conditioning, to improve the lot of the victim, as it were, rather than to contribute to his freedom and ennoblement. It conduces to a situation in which the imaginative few "benevolently" manipulate the conditioned many at a level of response which is more fundamentally animal than human.

Any therapeutic technique which reduces human suffering is valuable; but the reduction of suffering cannot be the exclusive aim of the human sciences. Its quest must be towards a higher peak where

all men share the knowledge and skills that are necessary for them to master their own humanity.

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