Review Mini-Symposium

The Polarized Mind: Why It's Killing Us and What We Can Do about It

By: **Kirk J. Schneider**
University Professors Press, Colorado Springs, 2013, 202 pp
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The Polarized Mind
reviewed by **John Rowan**

This is quite an odd book. The first two chapters follow the thinking of Eric Hoffer, a longshoreman who wrote an excellent book in 1951 called *The True Believer*. His case was that 'The True Believer is the most dangerous man in the world'. He made a very good case, and Schneider follows him: if someone feels inadequate to deal with the world situation, he or she (usually he) may latch on to a powerful figure or group that seems to have the answer. He may then idealize, or indeed idolize, this figure or group, and follow it intensively, to the extent of being willing to oppose physically any opponent, or indeed any person or group which thinks otherwise. Schneider calls this 'the polarized mind'.

The first two chapters of this book follow this idea, ranging from ancient Babylon through the Bible, ancient Greece, Rome, the East, the Christian Empire, Napoleon, the Soviet Empire, Imperial Japan, Nazi Germany and Maoist China to exemplify the theme. So far, so good. But then we get a different chapter, which is just about the evils of exploitation and expansionism, with no mention of any psychological insights or explanations.

Part 2 is devoted to 'What we can do about the polarized mind'. And the answer given is that we have to adopt an awe-based mind instead of a polarized mind. This of course follows earlier books where Schneider has written at length about awe. I have never been convinced by this approach, because it seems to me that it conflates two quite different ideas. On the one hand, it is virtually identical with the humanistic virtue of openness. This is really about the move from first-tier thinking to second-tier thinking, with its adoption of dialectical logic instead of formal logic. Most humanistic workshops and trainings involve this shift of consciousness. But Schneider sneakily slips in, with this idea, a much more spiritual theme, involving profundity, connectedness, the numinous, an awareness of vastness, ineffable wonder, and heightened perception. This material seems to me much more to do with what Ken Wilber calls the Subtle realm, the realm of spirituality proper. We then get a mass of historical material showing that this shift of thought – from polarized thinking to awe-based thinking – is possible, and has indeed occurred in a number of historical movements.

In Chapter 6, entitled 'Toward a fluid center of life', we get child rearing as one of the most important requirements towards an awe-based culture. If we can move in this way towards an awe-based society, we shall achieve wisdom. 'Wisdom is the "guidance system" for awe and leads to the fluidly centered life.'

I have to say that this seems a very optimistic book. It speaks of nothing less than a massive shift of consciousness. It seems to me very much like the shift from the Mental Ego consciousness to the Centaur consciousness that Wilber talks about. Wilber himself is quite sanguine about this, saying that it only needs 10 per cent of the population to make this shift, and the rest will follow. The Spiral Dynamics people seem less sure that the shift from Green to Yellow consciousness will take place on a mass scale, seeing it as an unlikely outcome. My own view is that although this is a passionate book, with an impressive sense of history, it is not particularly convincing as a harbinger of world-wide change.

John Rowan, 11 September 2014

The Polarized Mind reviewed by **R.J. Chisholm**

When Awe is Not Enough

Kirk Schneider defines psychological polarization as 'the elevation of one point of view to the complete exclusion of other points of view'. Although the greater part of his book documents the existence of such polarization throughout history, he still claims that it is now a 'modern plague'. Sadly, contemporary events seem to confirm his thesis, as there is no shortage of intolerant ideologies and theologies flourishing in the world today, while more tolerant and inclusive belief systems seem to be suffering a crisis of confidence. As Yeats put it in his poem 'The Second Coming' almost a century ago: 'the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity'.

Given the dismal state of current affairs, it might have been hoped that *The Polarized Mind* could have offered a timely analysis, and perhaps even a remedy for things. Unfortunately, the book is too unclear and too poorly argued to shed any light on the present situation. The problem begins with Schneider's conception of polarization as the root of all evil. Although there are countless examples of intolerant forms of fanaticism exerting a baleful influence throughout human history, it is mistaken to claim that excluding the points of view of others is, in all instances, inherently wrong or fanatical. To have opposed the Nazis and completely rejected their dehumanizing ideals (as such anti-Nazis as Thomas Mann and Dietrich Bonhoeffer did) required great moral clarity and courage. Such opposition demanded nothing less than the complete denial of the values of the Third Reich. Similarly, there is nothing to be said in favour of slavery. Total opposition to slavery as an institution did not betray a fanatical mindset, but expressed entirely justified moral convictions. Schneider would no doubt agree with both of these political positions, as his book mostly tends toward a gentle liberalism. It is disappointing then that he doesn't allow for the possibility that casting opposing sides as good or evil doesn't necessarily arise out of some neurotic need to polarize, but might originate in clear moral understanding.

Another problem with the book is its reliance on history, rather than psychology, as the principle means of presenting examples of polarization. Although history does provide an abundance of such examples to draw on, Schneider's generalizations show little insight or familiarity with history, and leave in question his understanding of polarization as an historical phenomenon. Moreover, he merely looks at historical instances of polarization, but does not consider it as an historical process. He does warn his readers that his history offers mere snapshots or 'haiku', but this hardly excuses the judgements and analyses that are supposed to support his thesis.

Although Schneider is a psychologist, there is very little psychological analysis in his book. He presents a few brief sketches of some important figures in history, but none of these amounts to a character study. Even so, he argues that there is an identifiable psychological dynamic that drives the polarized mind. He claims that it is panic or dread of 'cosmic insignificance', often arising out of some childhood trauma, which compels people to adopt a polarized mentality. Unfortunately, his argument isn't developed from observation, but is presented as a metaphysical insight from on high.

Equally his concept of cosmic insignificance as a psychological principle is rather vague. What reason is there to believe that there must be only one cause for someone to become fanatical in their beliefs? The life histories and characters of people who became committed Nazis, for example, varied widely, even though all had shared ardently in Hitler's vision of the German people as the master race. It seems far-fetched to say that each Nazi's motive for embracing this ideology was due to his or her dread of cosmic insignificance. It is far more plausible to suppose that each member of the party had their individual motives, that made Nazism appear as an attractive course of action.

Schneider follows his historical reflections with an antidote to cosmic insignificance, which he terms the 'awe-based mind'. This mentality recognizes paradox and mystery in the human condition, while according an inherent dignity to each human being. There is not much that is objectionable in such a humane ideal, and most readers of this journal would, I suspect, approve of its values. Yet I question whether awe can provide any basis for a political or social structure. Schneider might have considered pluralism, for pluralism in its various forms would seem to offer a better defence against the dangers of polarization. Pluralism asserts as fundamental axioms that no doctrine or set of ideas has an absolute claim to truth, and that all human institutions and actions are fallible and should thus be open to criticism. Pluralism is also more concerned with concrete problems than with mysteries, though it might still regard mystery as a spur to meaningful inquiry. But basing his discussion in awe, as he does, Schneider does not bother to consider such practicalities.

R.J. Chisholm is a counsellor with the Tariki Trust, Leicestershire.

The Polarized Mind
reviewed by **Alexandra Chalfont**

Every so often, I tap a little app on my desktop. I do this particularly at moments when I want to remember how transient worldly contexts have ever been, or how small my own current concerns are in the bigger picture. The app opens a geo-political map of Europe, showing the boundaries of countries from Britain in the West to Russia in the East in the year 1100. The moment it's clicked, it becomes a film charting the dramatically fluctuating borders, the shrinkages and expansions of power shifts, changing the colours of Europe dramatically over a period of 1000 years in just 2.5 minutes, ending in 2011.

It is sad and painful to focus through these merely abstract changing shapes on a screen into the terrible invasions, slaughters, oppressions and cruel traumas people have suffered across the generations; to notice that this has ever been part of the human condition, this constant struggle between annihilation and survival, between constriction and expansion, between decay and growth.

What is it that leads some to want to destroy and subjugate others? This question and the possible antidote are the core of this book. Kirk Schneider believes it is existential fear leading to 'Polarization, the privileging of one reality to the wholesale exclusion of competing realities', and holds it to be 'one of the chief scourges of humanity' (p. 160). This kind of extremism, fuelled by fear of death and a sense of one's own smallness, drives some to create ways of making themselves bigger, more powerful and ostensibly eternal in some sense, to the detriment and destruction of others, whether individuals or groups.

There are two parts to the book. The first is an impressive run-through of myth and historical events (much like the boundary map I describe above). These illustrate in vignette style (he calls it 'historical haiku') examples of polarization, starting with the Babylonian text of Enuma Elish (c.3500 BCE), through the Hebrew Bible, Ancient Greece and Rome, India, the East, to European history including Nazism, to Maoist China and finally a chapter on America and expansionism. Example after passionate example follow of 'expressions of polarization: bigotry, bullying, tyranny, vengefulness and arrogance', as well as 'narrowness, rigidity, pedantry and obsession' (p. 19). It will take more than 2.5 minutes to read, but it fairly gallops through history, noting how attempts at aggrandizement and expansion find a dynamic of extremism, culminating in contraction and self-destruction. Academics may cavil at the précis style, but it makes for captivating reading and illustrates his point impressively.

What is it that this polarized mind is unable to do, and how are we to deal with it? Its major failing is to be able to live with ambiguity, to move freely and creatively between polarities, and to develop in itself a wisdom that is 'based on a framework of Awe', on the capacity 'the humility and wonder – or sense of adventure – towards living' (p. 161).

In Part 2, Schneider advocates that we get back in touch with the mystery of being, realizing that 'creation IS the primary miracle' (Becker, p. 105), and accepting the paradox of both humility and wonder inherent in awe: that we are 'moldering dust and glittering god, and our solace lies between those extremes.'

Thus he does attempt some answers, but not with any pedestrian prescription. Drawing on Ernest Becker, he highlights how humans, due in main to significant developmental trauma in their lives that has not enjoyed any healing support, are terrified of their own death and their own insignificance, and struggle against this by trying to 'be somebody' who is more than others. In this part of the book some of the same historical themes of Part 1 are revisited, this time pointing out examples of where and how wisdom has been able to develop and take the place of polarization. Epictetus, Socrates, Goethe and Nietzsche are some of those quoted, and Kierkegaard named as an important inspiration for the book, noting that 'the full human is in part a tragic human, harrowingly constricted and fragile but equally astoundingly resourceful and bold'.

As psychotherapist readers we recognize traits in the polarized mind that can be readily attributed to classifications such as BPD – borderline personality disorder. (By the way, it is so heartening to learn that this label will finally be eradicated from the 11th edition of the International Classification of Diseases, ICD.) We might attend to attachment patterns and intergenerational trauma, seeking to help the person (re)establish attunement, connection, trust, love and autonomy. Can this be achieved on a scale to change the cycles of destruction in and between human societies? Each day brings news that indicates otherwise, and yet we go on in hope and faith in the mystery of it all.

A major strength of the book is that it makes you go away and *think*. You might wish (as I occasionally did) that more, and more comprehensive, attention had been given

to attachment theory; to early-life trauma; to the psycho-social-biological aspects of separation and connection and social dynamics; more differentiated political argument; more-in depth attention to the existential philosophers. Schneider avoids jargon, particularly that of psychotherapy, in this book. But that, I feel, is the whole point: this singular strong theme of polarization will hopefully carry the book to a far wider audience; it can sensitize us to manifestations of polarization in many areas of our public and private lives, on our local and world stage, and inspire yet more important and urgent conversations about how to contend with this continuing human existential crisis.

Alexandra Chalfont is a UKCP-registered psychotherapist, a trainer, supervisor and executive coach. She works integrally–relationally in private practice with individuals and couples in West London, and is a former editor of *Self & Society*.

Response to the Reviews by **Kirk Schneider**

First, I would like to thank the editors for the opportunity to reply to this special symposium of reviews of my book, *The Polarized Mind*. This is a comparatively rare opportunity for an author, but a helpful one, I think, in the context of a fuller and (hopefully) more stimulating dialogue.

I would also like to thank the reviewers for the time and effort they have made to frankly and concertedly convey their views. I appreciate the rather novel and controversial nature of my book, and realize that it is likely to stir a variety of reactions. That said, I have several comments on the associated reviews, confining myself in particular to those passages with which I differ or feel the need to question.

In R.J. Chisholm's pointedly critical reflection 'When awe is not enough', he states that my book is 'too unclear' and 'poorly argued to shed any light on the present situation'. Aside from finding this statement almost absurdly strident on its face (e.g. the book fails to shed *'any'* light? [emphasis mine]), I also find Chisholm's rationale for the statement notably wanting. First, I challenge the reviewer's assertion that I find polarization 'the root of all evil'. Nowhere do I state this – because to do so would eliminate all kinds of nature-caused evils, e.g. earthquakes, illnesses etc. that are obviously responsible for many of the world's ails. What I do convey, on the other hand, is that psychological polarization is a powerful underpinning of many if not most of humanity's *human-induced* suffering, which is a far cry from how Chisholm mischaracterizes my stance.

Chisholm then goes on to mischaracterize the scope of my definition of psychological polarization as pertaining to behaviour that 'is in all instances inherently wrong or fanatical'. Again, nowhere do I make such an absolutist claim, and if Chisholm had read the book's opening section more carefully, he would have noted that I make a clear distinction between polarization, which is the fixation on a single point of view to the utter exclusion of competing points of view (with the emphasis on 'utter exclusion' and panic-driven *opposition*), and 'extremism', which is a much more neutral term denoting simply deviation from the ordinary (see p. 1). Now deviation from the ordinary, or even 'excessive' psychological states, can be either polarized as I've defined it, or in some cases (and as Chisholm well points out) that which many people would consider heroic and just. The issue is one of degree

of compulsion (e.g. panic) and degree of exclusivity (e.g. absolutism). I argue that the kinds of luminaries (e.g. Mann, Bonhoeffer and abolitionists) held up by Chisholm as exemplars of polarized minds are precisely the contrary. While they (and many others throughout history) may share some of the excesses of polarized minds, those excesses tended to be significantly more transient, flexible, and affirmative than the panic-driven, compulsive, and absolutist mentalities of, say, Hitler (or, for that matter, Stalin, Mao, and other notorious fanatics cited in my book). That is, if you study the lives of these respective personalities, you find that as ardent as many would consider moral revolutionaries may be, they are almost invariably motivated more by deliberative, affirmative *visions* as distinct from reactive, terrified *repulsions* than those we see in the fanatic. So again, polarization and extremism should not be conflated, and virtually everything that Chisholm says critically from the outset of his review is based on this mischaracterization.

Regarding Chisholm's point about the brevity of my analysis of polarized minds through history, I concede the point that much more detail and historical acumen could be applied to the inquiry. But, as I caution readers, and as Chisholm rightly points out, this was not my intent, nor my expertise as a psychologist. By contrast, I wanted to write a book that strikes me as all too rare in these academically confining times – a historically informed depth-psychological treatment of destructive individuals and cultures. If the pendulum is seen as swinging too far to the depth psychological as distinct from the historically technical, it was only because, in my humble view, the pendulum conventionally swings far too vehemently to the other side, and needed to be righted. Chisholm does make a fair point here, however, and I welcome historians who perceive that I have set matters notably off the mark. On the other hand, I have yet to receive this kind of feedback, and on the whole, have generally received supportive comments, particularly from well-informed peer reviewers.

On another point, it is a puzzlement to me as to how Chisholm could make the statement that the bases for my findings derive from 'on high', as if from 'thin air', and as if I don't take pains in the book to clarify that my perspective is the consequence of a very favourable convergence between existential depth-therapeutic findings and the findings of quantitative research on the roots of violence and its amelioration. For example, Chisholm mentions nothing about my numerous references to the prominent social psychological field of 'terror-management theory', the established findings on 'self-actualization', and the recent scientific literature on the psychology of wisdom and awe.

Finally, Chisholm's critique of my use of the term 'awe' as distinct from pluralism, as a guidepost for the invigorated society, is well taken. 'Pluralism' is the term used by William James and others, and certainly has been posed as an antidote to polarization. On the other hand, I find 'pluralism' to be a bit too diffuse and cerebral to compete with the seductions of the polarized mind. We've had various forms of pluralism (particularly in the West) for many decades now, even centuries, and it seems dangerously thin at times as a counter to the intensities of fanatical movements. For example, the United States has a core history of pluralistic thinking, but that has not stopped it from fanatically motivated racism, militarism and religiosity, as I've pointed out in my book. (And this does not even account for the fanatical devastation of erstwhile pluralistic Europe just 70 years ago!) The 'whole-bodied', experiential sense of awe, on the other hand, may prove a helpful complement to the pluralistic mentality. It is not a matter of 'either/or', as Chisholm implies, but 'both' pluralism 'and' awe-informed pathways for living. The wisest pluralists, like James himself, upheld this view.

I appreciate a number of aspects of John Rowan's critique of my book. Although it is a bit jarring, I can appreciate Rowan's characterization of my book as 'odd' because it is certainly not your 'run-of-the-mill' reflection on human destructiveness. The book addresses many comparatively untapped lines of inquiry – existential bases of cultural abuse, recent convergences between depth and experimental inquiry, explorations of psychospiritual groundlessness as a basis for belligerent societies, and the potential for individual and social renewal through the psychologies of wisdom and awe. As a psychohistory of humanity, the book is also not your typical 'case study'.

On the other hand, Rowan's characterization of the initial section of my book as an extension of Eric Hoffer's trail-blazing study of mass movements, *The True Believer*, does not particularly strike me as odd. Hoffer's work, among a number of others, such as Ernest Becker's *Denial of Death*, as well as terror-management theory, converge powerfully in my view to provide the scaffolding for the polarized mind.

As to Rowan's second point, I am unclear. Although I grant that there was somewhat less psychological analysis in the section on US expansionism, it was hardly in my view bereft of 'psychological insight or explanation'.

Such insights were provided by a range of discussions about how the sense of insignificance (smallness) triggered compensatory lusts for power in cultures and individuals from Christopher Columbus, to the settlers exiled from England, to the 'Indian fighters', to the early and contemporary industrialists.

Basically, I agree with a number of Rowan's points – the book does center on awe-based consciousness; I have written extensively about this matter, and I do see it as integral to the depolarization of humanity. However, it is clear that we disagree to some extent about the issue of awe-based consciousness. I don't agree that it is interchangeable with the humanistic notion of 'openness'. Openness is a very general term implying breadth of outlook and inquiry. Awe, on the other hand, specifically embraces the paradoxes of our smallness (humility) and greatness (capacity to wonder and transcend) in the context of the creation. These are two related but distinct sensibilities, and I don't think 'openness' has the intensity and depth of the sense of awe.

But be that as it may, there are also clear differences in our understanding of levels of consciousness and the so-called conflation of the spiritual with the personal. That is a topic which has been explored at length in a series of debates I had with both Rowan and Wilber (see Schneider, 2012), but suffice it to say here that I believe the picture is much more muddied and intertwining than either Rowan or Wilber presume. It is plausible, in my view, for *both* personal and transcendent (e.g. awe-based) experiences to coexist, and even more, to thrive in optimal combinations, without having to dichotomize the self as either personal or transpersonal. But these are more matters of perception than disagreement.

Lastly, I convey my abiding appreciation to Chalfont, not only because I feel her review really 'grasped' the essence of my book, but because she recognized that the book is really aimed at a mass audience, accompanied by an urgency that optimally, such an audience will heed.

Reference

Schneider, K.J. (2012) 'Existentialism and the transpersonal: a rejoinder', *Existential Analysis*, 23 (1)

Kirk Schneider, Ph.D., is President-Elect of the Society for Humanistic Psychology, Division 32 of the American Psychological Association; Adjunct Faculty, Saybrook University, Teachers College, Columbia University; V.P., the Existential-Humanistic Institute: ehinstitute.org. Website: kirkjschneider.com

Letters to the Editors

From **Jane Barclay**

Dear Self & Society,

The moment I turned the page and found Susannah Hoare's title 'Boarding School, the Happiest Days of Your Life?', my heart opened. At last, a personal piece underpinned by experience as well as theory, and one that shows, in its perfect 'less is more' way, the essence of life at boarding school (the truth about which I am passionate).

I felt especially moved that only two weeks before, I had met and worked with Susannah – on the workshop I facilitated for therapists in Exeter, on the experience of Boarding School.

This is an article I shall keep and refer to and draw on, if ever I need reminding of the core experiences of every single child in this very particular form of institution.

With thanks,

Jane Barclay, AHPP, UKCP reg.
Therapeutic Counsellor & Psychotherapist, Exeter

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