

Pathological Altruism

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Brings together several fresh fields of science in a remarkable series of papers

This collection of papers explores many different manifestations of pathological altruism. One of the most extreme would be suicide bombers. A couple of the papers explore the cultural dimension of suicide bombers. What they do is reprehensible in according to Western cultural values, but may make sense, and indeed be altruistic, by the whites of the cultures in which the suicide bombers act. Likewise beheadings, to name one that they cite. We in the West look at beheadings is incredibly barbarous acts, but in another culture that is simply a means of dealing with crime. Other pathological altruists may be super patriots, military men who give their lives for other people and their units, battered wives who enable their husbands, likewise the wives of alcoholics who enable their husbands, people with eating disorders, cat ladies who supposedly taking care of animals actually affirm the men themselves, foreign aid donors, who are motivated more by the good feeling that comes with giving than the actual benefits of long-term benefits received by the beneficiaries. In this case they cite Linda Polman's book, *The Crisis Caravan* (which I reviewed) among others.

Science builds on theories. A theory starts out as a wild hunch. That hunch will be consistent with certain observations. The scientist posits it as a theory and devises future tests. The test can prove that a theory is true, but they can't prove that they are false. The theory which stands up to efforts to prove its falsehood for long enough becomes generally accepted. Theories thus move from the fringe, believed by a few, to being mainstream over a period of several years. A recent example would be the Big Bang theory of the creation of the universe.

So the progression is that something goes from a wild-eyed theory to a generally accepted theory and then from generally accepted theory to being a fact that is so universally accepted that it's everyday knowledge. Something such as Galileo's wild eyed theory that the earth revolves around the sun is now in the category of facts which everybody accepts.

There's a parallel process of theories operating in the political realm. People come up with political theories. Plato and Aristotle did. Karl Marx did. The Enlightenment did. Those theories may be subject to empirical tests but they are also subject to political operation. A theory may be false, but if it has the support of a majority of people in a democracy, is accepted nonetheless. Communism was based on a theory of human nature that was absolutely false. Communism posited that people were sufficiently altruistic that they would all work for the common good. This has nowhere been observed to be true and it proved not to be true in the Soviet Union. However the theory was imposed by popular the will, if not in Russia, at least in other places where the communists were voted into power. It has been tried.

Likewise, there have been a number of theories of human nature that have been popular through the 20th century. The most common of these might be called the Standard Social Science Model, which arose from the work of Watson and Skinner in the 1930s, which posited that human beings were all essentially

the same, and that whatever differences occurred among adult individuals was a matter of their socialization. Watson famously said, give him 12 healthy infants and he will give you a doctor and a beggarman out of them. Who they became was 100% cultural, zero percent attributable to inherited traits.

The Standard Social Science Model has dominated the educational realm for 50 years or so. This Standard Social Science Model is the underlying hypothesis behind the theories that there are no differences among races, sexes, and people of different sexual orientations. That's the equality posited by democracy, rather, the equality under law but the labor which the Enlightenment philosophers said must exist, was also true because people are in fact equal in capabilities.

Several new fields of science have emerged over the past third of a century, among them molecular biology and genetics, sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, and a rich literature on self deception. They are supported by a rich assortment of mathematical modeling tools and statistical analysis tools. These authors assume the reader to be familiar with the science and the supporting tools. They do not even acknowledge that huge swaths of the academic community have yet to abandon the Standard Social Science Model in the face of such rich bodies of new work. This book simply assumes a number of theories to be true. In other words, there is a sufficient acceptance of the theses upon which the theories in this book are based the nobody questions them. Let me list the interesting theories.

First, there is a thesis that human beings continue to evolve. It is pretty much universally agreed that the human species, *Homo sapiens*, migrated out of Africa 50,000 years ago. Evolution then continued among the peoples who immigrated out of Africa. Moreover, the pace of evolution quickened with the human diaspora throughout the planet, and especially since the dawn of agriculture.

Part of the cultural genetic evolution had to do with Asiatics and Europeans differential metabolic and mental processes governed by serotonin and vasopressin. The Oriental societies are more consensus oriented, more cooperative, whereas Western societies are more individualistic. This is demonstrated by genetic differences that parallel the cultural differences.

Similarly, these authors assume the theory that there are differences between men and women's brains. Men's brains are formed in the presence of testosterone in utero, and they operate somewhat differently than women's brains. The processes are the same, but under the influence of varying amounts of hormones, the outcomes may be different. Specifically, they find that men have a somewhat of a tendency to suppress emotion and look for engineering type solutions. The extreme example of this type of mindset has found an autistic people, who are predominantly male. At the other end of the spectrum there are people who are more driven by empathy. These are more frequently women than men, although there is broad overlap. The important question here is that there is neurological research to support empirical observations about sex differences.

One of the facts which underlies much of the science is the new tools and statistics that have emerged over the past few decades. One of them is structural equation modeling. The papers presented in this

volume did not talk about that the mechanics, the tools by which they the researchers cited in their studies prove their points, but it is almost universally done using statistical methods, probably using the software found in the SPSS package – statistical package for the social sciences. The availability of the software, about 40 years now, has revolutionized the social sciences in that it is now feasible to do reasonably top reasonably good quality analyses. The papers cited here talk about the various study instruments and the correlations that they find. Establishing the validity of test instruments, questionnaires and the like, is an entire science of itself which is emerged in parallel. It is very true that not all tests in the social sciences conform to the rigorous standards of statistics and sampling techniques. Nonetheless, there are standards by which they can be measured, and when a test is cited in a papers such as the many in this volume, one assumes one at least knows that there are criteria to which the statistical analyses could be subjected if one wanted to criticize the question is not whether or not a given study is correct. There is a preponderance of evidence question. There are so many studies, pointing more or less the same direction, that unless there is widespread collusion that direction must be valid.

Another thing that is taken as given in all of the studies cited here is neurological research using fMRI that is, functional MRIs. Neuroscience has come an incredibly long ways. Neuroscientists are able to watch physiologically what happens in certain areas of the brain under all sorts of varying circumstances. We know now, the way that we certainly did not 30 years ago, which parts of the brain are involved in which functions. We also know a great deal more about genetics and we did 30 years ago. In the intervening time we have decoded the entire human genome, and we know which genes are generally involved in processes such as empathy, rest considered decision-making versus impulsive decision-making, wifebeating and many other social phenomena. While it is rare to find a genetic determinism, a situation in which a genetic anomaly definitely dictates some mental outcome, it is extremely common to find correlations that are significant between behaviors and genetic compositions of people. This is at odds with the hypothesis of the Standard Social Science Model, which only makes sense – that model is extremely dated, about 80 years old.

There is a question of free will which the author which many of the papers in this volume tackled. Given that there may be a genetic predisposition to some behavior, pathological altruism being the subject at hand, the question is to what extent do the actors retain free will, and to what extent are they simply the captives of their genetic makeup, and do not have any choice in how they behave. For instance, psychopaths have a typically different serotonin metabolism than normal people. Are psychopaths responsible for their actions? Here again we bring science up against social considerations. The social considerations are the laws, on one hand, and the political process which writes the laws. The papers in this volume address the conflicts among science, politics and law, without proposing in general a resolution. It appears necessary to continue to work with the hypothesis that free will is operative, that people are generally responsible for their acts. This must be sure even though it is certainly the case that people are genetically predisposed to some kind of actions rather than others.

Finally, to the question that is not broadly addressed: manifestations of pathological altruism among entire societies. One might posit that the Germans are so contrite, so anxious to make amends for the

crimes of the Third Reich that they go overboard making amends and apologizing, and are reluctant even to have children. One paper questions whether it is real altruism not to have children, but rather spend one's money vacationing "from Arizona to Zimbabwe." Still, there is much more work to be done.