

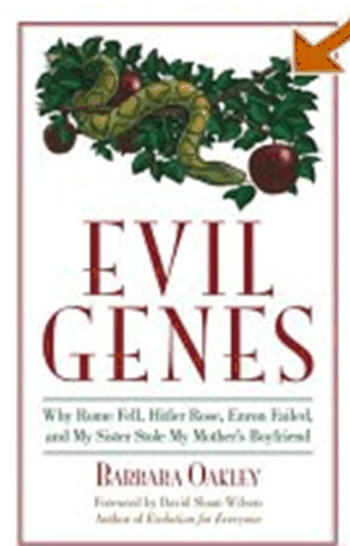
## EVIL GENES

*Why Rome fell, Hitler rose, Enron failed,  
and my sister stole my mother's boyfriend*

by Dr. Barbara Oakley

2007, Prometheus, 416 pages

With a title like this, you just have to believe you're in for an entertaining and informative read. Moreover, you suspect the author, who is an Oakland University (Michigan) engineering professor—and was a good friend of my late brother Forrest, and is attending my small book discussion group on her work—with a colorful, enterprising past, will be followed by controversy on account of the ideas especially among her academic minions. Barbara told me as much when we met for coffee a couple of weeks ago: "Although I'm in the engineering college, even with that I run into a strong wave of PC disapproval." (I'm paraphrasing.)



It reminds me of the previous book I reviewed, the comment by the author Toby Young that during his stay at Harvard he was quite perturbed by the closing of the American (academic) mind:

"I agreed wholeheartedly with Bloom [author of *The Closing of the American Mind*], but what particularly appalled me about political correctness wasn't the creed itself but the dogmatism of its proponents. This point has been made so often it's become a cliché, but after three years at Oxford with its almost decadent atmosphere of intellectual freedom, I was shocked by how little dissent was tolerated at Harvard. Anyone who disagreed with the new orthodoxy was automatically branded a racist or a sexist or a homophobe—and the consequences of this were as serious as they had been for those branded communists during the McCarthy era. — page 18

I recall our book discussion group reviewing a simple little book once, *Sex and the Brain*, by Jo Durden-Smith and Diane deSimone, which basically lays out Bell Curve statistics for inherited mental differences between men and women: you know, men are statistically more capable of this, women are statistically more capable of that; science could find nothing in 'nurture' to account for the differences. Well that sort of assertion—and there are celebrated scholars whose names escape me at the moment who are shouted down and ostracized from university life because they suggest inherited racial differences in mental aptitudes exist—can get a truth seeker booted off the ivory tower. Whether you have solid evidence is immaterial.

So it is with Dr. Oakley's thesis, namely that the gene package we receive from our parents, can be a prescription for psychological trauma, if not disaster. But as one researcher she quotes puts it so eloquently: "genes are about risk—not fate; no single gene by itself can predict personality." [1] So I'm sure Oakley believes behavior still has a cultural component, an environmental component, and a volitional component.

Oakley leads with the question of the book: Do genes have a role in the "successfully sinister" members of our society, and if so, what is the nature of that genetic pull? She discusses recent developments in psychological assessment, some standard personality-type mapping documentation known as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental

Disorders, now in its fourth revision (DSM-IV). From what I can gather, the psychologists use the term "Machiavellianism" and most "personality disorders" if not synonymously at least as all indicative of psychological characteristics in an individual that are bad news for the general public.

Oakley centers on the so-called borderline personality disorder, a DSM-IV profile that dovetails fairly closely with Machiavellianism. This bad boy includes the following characteristics:

- ☐ splitting behavior—swings between idealizing and demonizing people in relationships
- ☐ projection—a negative characteristic of oneself that you attribute to someone else
- ☐ blame shifting
- ☐ control issues
- ☐ interpersonal oversensitivity
- ☐ situational competence
- ☐ narcissistic demands
- ☐ gaslighting—involves the flat denial or contradiction of a self-evident fact that someone else has asserted or that the subject has previously asserted
- ☐ chameleon behavior

Technology exists today to show the correspondence of some psychological disorders with gene presence. Dr. Oakley presents some interesting mental imaging technology that enables researchers to determine neurological behavior in connection with perceptions or other stimuli in a test environment. She also provides a fair amount of discussion on the structure and function of the brain. I was particularly interested in the description of the limbic system, which seems to be the "precursor brain," i.e. it's what we got along with before the cerebral cortex emerged via evolution.

Probably this is a bit of an oversimplification, but I think of the limbic system as the "Budweiser Brain (B2)," how I perceive the world when I've had a six-pack of that "premium water recycled through a Clydesdale." And from my experience in politics, it disturbs me that so many humans operate on a Budweiser-Brain level 24/7, usually without any alcohol assistance. Unmodulated B2 is why so many people actually voted for McCain/Palin, or believe America is infallible even if it tortures, or why the stripper doing the pole dance only has eyes for you. Sorry for the digression, but (re)learning about the limbic system gives me a lot of ideas for future work.

Back to the book, Dr. Oakley moves on to show how some of the "major assholes of history," chiefly Slobodan Milosevic and Mao Tse-tung, displayed borderline disorders. (I know it's easy to consider these guys psychopaths, and while I'm not exactly sure of the distinction, the author suggests that psychos function abysmally in society.) When one considers the millions of lives lost or ruined by men who slip through or are enabled by our social approval networks—but are basically the most toxic twisted fucks imaginable—that's when you gotta ask yourself a question: how do we filter them out?

Is there something available thru gene therapy? I'll bet there will be, someday. But the author doesn't really address cures like performing a routine gene (allele) mapping diagnosis on newborns, then at the parents' option preparing a remedial cocktail for the little tyke. Not only to preclude major personality threats, but to make it so he won't have any trouble learning to read or he'll never suck at golf.

Being a little facetious here. But, as someone who envisions the human race approaching Kurzweil's Singularity within a couple or three decades, I wonder if the gene therapy route for ensuring that your babies 'don't grow up to be cowboys'—or mass murderers—will be necessary. Probably by the time the current crop of younglings reaches conventional human primetime, "we" will have such control of our own biology as individuals to have transcended biology. Still, nobody should object to simple gene modification techniques to nip psychological problems in the bud.

Fortunately, and I believe Dr. Oakley will agree, we still have access to our standard cultural-ideological solution—I mean through greater understanding via books such as hers, the human knowledge pool deepens. Then at least from the standpoint of social afflictions, we can spread that knowledge to keep people with manifest aggression issues from acquiring any political power. After all, when the world reaches the maturity of consciousness that leads to the Sacred Nonaggression Principle as de rigueur, who needs to worry about a handful of oddballs with inherited megalomania genes?

*We may still have the borderlines adversely affecting business and public affairs—Dr. Oakley spends some narrative on the Enron abuses and such narcissistic dominators as Martha Stewart—but these driven, conniving sociopaths won't get to play with guns, so their damage will not kill anyone.*

Evil Genes provides a solid presentation of some of the issues that presently attend the prospects or desirability of intentionally altering behavior genetically. As important, the author goes through the science and engineering that is becoming available to do just that. Finally, she fleshes out (esp. with her own sister's story) how the disturbed personality can function for virtually his/her entire life as "successfully sinister;" she gives us several signs for knowing a borderline when we encounter one... along with coping strategies.

It's a first-rate book with a first-class index and useful appendix material. I do find myself wishing for more explicit, extensive treatment of the whole area of psychological gene therapy.[2] Though by the absence of such treatment, at least I'm left with a greater desire to learn more.

My book discussion group had a delightful, informative discussion with Dr. Oakley this Sunday. We look forward to her upcoming book on people with genes that tend to make them too nice for their own good.

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[1] From Dr. Weinberger, director of the National Institute of Mental Health's Genes, Cognition, and Psychosis program. Dr. Weinberger is a leading researcher into the genetics of personality disorders, and several areas of Dr. Oakley's narrative discuss ideas from his key papers.

[2] I suspect the lack of a lot of concrete proposals for gene-therapy technology, especially when applied to the mind or to the personality, is due partly to the desire to avoid hysterical negative emotional reactions from those in the academic or religious-ethics community who mistakenly feel such technology breaches morality, even if voluntary. I can just hear accusations of "Hitler's tool" and "eugenics monster" hurled at the good doctor.

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