

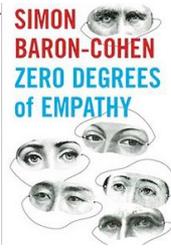


Books

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# Zero Degrees of Empathy

Simon Baron-Cohen • Penguin Books • 2012



WHEN Simon Baron-Cohen's *Six Degrees of Empathy* first appeared in hardback last year, Dorothy Rowe, writing in *The Guardian* (15<sup>th</sup> April 2011), described it as "a book that gets to the heart of man's inhumanity to man". I'm not convinced. Having just read the paperback recently published by Penguin, I can say that it's certainly an interesting and worthwhile attempt, but I suspect that ultimately it has failed to pluck out the heart of the mystery of human cruelty.

Baron-Cohen, professor of developmental psychopathology at Cambridge and a cousin of Sacha, begins his thesis with the holocaust and a powerful opening sentence: "When I was seven years old, my father told me the Nazis had turned Jews into lampshades". More horrific examples of human cruelty follow including the story recounted by Thomas Buergenthal in *A Lucky Child* about his experience as a nine-year-old in Auschwitz, where he had to watch while an inmate was ordered to hang his friend who had tried to escape. The SS guard told him to put a noose around his friend's neck, but he couldn't do it because his hands were shaking so much. His friend turned to him, took the noose, kissed his hand and then put the noose around his own neck. Angrily, the SS guard kicked the chair away from under the man to be hanged.

The Holocaust is widely recognised as an exemplar of the evil that humans are capable of inflicting on one another. But what is evil? As Baron-Cohen says, it is treated as incomprehensible, a topic that cannot be dealt with because the scale of the horror is so great that nothing can convey its enormity. The concept of evil therefore effectively stops all inquiry. It is, in short, unhelpful and unscientific, and so he proposes to redefine the word in terms of empathy erosion. He defines empathy as "our ability to identify what someone else is thinking or feeling, and to respond to their thoughts and feelings with an appropriate emotion".

He and his colleagues developed a scale with which to measure empathy, ranging from level 0 to level 6. At level 0 some people are so lacking in empathy that they become capable of committing crimes, including murder, assault, torture and rape. At level 6 individuals have remarkable empathy, are altruistically focused on other people's feelings and go out of their way to be supportive. We should point out that not everyone on level zero is psychopathic. These are zero negative cases, but there is also a category of zero positive, which includes sufferers from autism who may have special skills in the areas of music, art or memory.

What leads an individual's empathizing mechanism to be set at different levels? Baron-Cohen's answer is that it depends on the functioning of a special circuit in the brain, the empathy circuit. Here the book becomes technical, and the non-specialist may want to skip these middle chapters, though what it says about psychopaths and the autistic brain is at times interesting and informative.

But what of the bigger question? Is evil a matter of 'empathy erosion'? Baron-Cohen does not say that it is the only factor. Instead, he says it is a necessary but not sufficient condition. He calls the empathy circuit the 'final common pathway because a range of factors can impact and compromise its functioning. He lists 12 in all: intentions, threat, social factors such as cultural sanctions, ideological factors such as beliefs or political goals, early experience, conformity and obedience, in-group/out-group identities, corrosive emotions, and biological factors such as genes, neurological conditions, hormones and physical states.

The truth, though, is that beliefs and ideology are surely more relevant causes of cruelty on a world canvas than empathy erosion or biology. Baron-Cohen himself mentions the fact that tens of thousands of ordinary Germans were complicit in the Holocaust and he traces anti-semitism as far back as Martin Luther's pamphlet *Against the Jews* (we could find its origins in the *New Testament*). Enslavement to ideas can lead to six degrees of empathy towards fellow believers and zero degrees of empathy towards opponents or out-groups. We have to accept that there is a fundamental difference between the cruelty (or evil, if we prefer) that an individual like Josef Frizl or Ian Huntley inflicts on other individuals and the cruelty that an individual perpetrates as a member of a group such as a nation or race or for an ideological cause.

Baron-Cohen is to be applauded for trying to move discussion of the causes of 'evil' out of the realm of religion and into the realm of science (in the US, the book is called *The Science of Evil*). As he says, religion has been singularly anti-inquiry on the topic: for most religions, the existence of evil is simply an awkward fact of the universe, present either because we fall short in our spiritual aspirations to lead a good life or because such forces (e.g., the Devil) are in constant battle with divine forces for control over human nature.

He is at least partly right to move the discussion into the social and biological sciences, but his explanation of 'evil' as 'empathy erosion' is really too vague and simplistic. Is someone with zero negative degrees not biologically wired to commit cruel acts and therefore devoid of human responsibility? Surely, in instances of sadistic cruelty, the perpetrator understands only too well the victim's feelings, and indeed this knowledge feeds the cruelty? And what is an 'appropriate emotion'? Is that not a moral rather than a scientific question?

In other words, although it appears scientific, empathy is a normative concept and should be placed in the categories of philosophy and ethics as much as the sciences. All these disciplines are needed to improve our understanding of man's inhumanity to man and other animals.