

*Evil Genes: Why Rome Fell, Hitler Rose, Enron Failed, and My Sister Stole My Mother's Boyfriend*

Barbara Oakley

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### **Grade School Bullies and Ruthless Dictators**

The next time you encounter one of those selfish individuals who don't seem to recognize, or care, that other people have feelings, have pity; it could just be in their genes. In *Evil Genes*, Barbara Oakley presents the spectrum of human meanness as a kaleidoscopic array of genetics, bio-chemistry, and environment. She places all of us on a multi-dimensional continuum and asks us to consider brutal dictators such as Hitler or Mao Tse-tung under the same lens with which we consider a demeaning boss or hot tempered room mate—or in her case, her cold and selfish sister.

Despite the title, there is little detail on the fall of Rome, and even less on Enron. But if you're interested in the general topic of personality disorders, mean people and genetics, you'll find plenty to chew on.

Oakley contends that the constellation of genetic disposition and environmental influences—all of which exist on a sliding scale—determines behavior and personality. Despite a loving childhood, an “unlucky shake of the genetic dice” can produce a full-blown psychopath. On the other hand, a “lighter dose” of meanness genes combined with a loving environment may result in a “normal” person “who can sometimes be difficult to deal with emotionally.” That same light dose in a poor environment, and you're back to the psychopath.

Referring to myriad scientific studies, she describes how genes relate to brain function and influence such traits as impulsivity, mood, and anxiety. She explains genetic influence over brain structures and their role in neural circuitry. She underpins all of this with studies indicating inheritability of behavioral traits. Ultimately, Oakley draws a scenario in which environmental or emotional stress, which is known to turn genes on and off, determines the course of neurological wiring and physical brain growth related to behavior.

Her conclusions seem intuitive, but her storyline bogs down in definitions and labels. The text vacillates between overlapping descriptions of psychopathy, borderline personality disorder, borderopathy and all manner of lesser disorders. The effect is dizzying. I quickly lost patience trying to differentiate and found myself asking “who cares which pegs fit in which holes?” The labels, perhaps more appropriate for clinicians and health insurance companies, did not reveal the source of evil behavior.

Through a blur of semantics, Oakley does manage to establish her point. Then she takes on the monumental challenge of applying her ideas to key historical figures such as

Solobodan Milosevic, Adolf Hitler, and Mao Tse-tung. Using biographies, news reports and other documents, Oakley pieces together information about their family histories, upbringings, reported ailments, and sinister traits that correlate nicely with those indicative of behavioral disorders. The evidence is all there in the text—though, like much of this book, it is mired in diagnostic terminology. The author digresses into confusing and disjointed attempts to diagnose political figures with which she has had no direct interaction, no psychologist’s session notes, and no neurological test reports.

Her insistence on labels seems torturously, almost embarrassingly, interwoven with her quest to find out why her sister—an apparently callous, self-centered individual—was who she was. Ultimately, this question provided the seed from which sprung her hypothesis: But for a slight shift in genetics and environment, the power-hungry over-achiever rises to ruthless despotism, and the family black sheep sinks low enough to steal a parent’s lover.

Finally, she presents studies suggesting a beneficial role for certain Machiavellian traits—theories of an evolutionary process that at times selects for aggressive, “me-first” characters. Taking food from your baby brother’s mouth, she writes, may be beneficial if it ensures your survival during a famine. Consider too, that CEO’s are known more as bulldogs than pussycats, and gold-digger spouses for their conniving hearts. Such characters, in principle, gain the power to ensure the success of their offspring. Successfully sinister people may possess a combination of evil genes and a genetic predisposition toward just enough self-control and charm to manipulate the rest of us. It is only when such personalities rise to positions of great power, she posits, that their Machiavellian traits are allowed to express themselves fully.

Naturally this line of thinking could lead to a downward slide toward genetically-prejudiced justice. But Oakley hopes it could lead to more informed treatment of disorders and understanding of difficult people. Because, as she points out, those genetic propensities are often just that, propensities, and evil is sometimes relative.

—Kimbra Cutlip

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