



## FORUM

### COMMENT ON AUTHOR BARBARA OAKLEY'S NEW BOOK, *Evil Genes*

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*Michael Sevilla*

*Evil Genes* is a highly readable book that weaves the story of the inner need of the author to understand her Machiavellian older sister with an engrossing presentation of the latest scientific studies such as the new brain imaging techniques. Additionally using psychology's developing but still incipient understandings of aberrant behavior, we gain insights into the disturbed or malevolent mind. The interweaving is artfully done with these latest findings aiding both author and reader to understand some of the sister's truly painful behavior such as stealing her own mother's boyfriend, apparently without a thought of regret. Discussions of borderline personalities, borderpaths and other mental pathologies are made real by looks at nefarious world leaders, such as Milosevic and Mao. Most troubling to some readers will be the thought that our behavior is influenced or even controlled by our Darwinian determined genetic makeup. The author clearly points out that these are tendencies that may never show but depend on environmental conditions for their expression, except, of course, for those profoundly affected by "evil genes." The author has

effectively popularized important recent developments in the science of the aberrant mind in a tale that many readers could relate to their own experiences.



## A NOTE ON BARBARA OAKLEY'S *Evil Genes*

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*Brian Murphy*

Oh, yes, I have read Stephen Hawking and admire Wendell Berry; I glance at the weekly Science section of *The New York Times*. But full disclosure: I am a hopeless, near-terminal English major. Therefore, I quite extravagantly admire Barbara Oakley's utterly fascinating book for its wit, its charm, and its daring: surely, it's pretty daring to put your sister and Hitler in the same sentence, to put them as part of the same question: What is evil? Is there such a thing?

Everybody seems to know about this book because of its very amusing sub-title, *Why Rome Fell, Hitler Rose, Enron Failed, and My Sister Stole My Mother's Boyfriend*.

But we should pay careful attention to the first part of the title. Her whole point: if genes can be evil, then "evil" can be in genes; and, therefore, evil is not somewhere else—in the devil, or in conscience (that "doth make cowards of us all"); or even somewhere in that troublesome concept that has vexed us for centuries—free will.

Now, we English major types have long been invited to consider this revolutionary proposition. For example, it's what Nietzsche (a favorite philosopher of literary types) meant by advising us to go Beyond Good and Evil—that is, obviously, be-

yond the traditional definitions of those slippery terms. One student of Nietzsche, Bernard Shaw, made this a major intellectual theme: if you ask a criminal why he does the “bad” things that he does, Shaw says, the only real answer is “Because that’s the way I’m made.” Nowadays, we’d say: Because that’s the way I’m wired.

The eminent and traditional historian Jacques Barzun, when invited to write an essay describing his own philosophy of life, began with four fateful words: “The will is free,” and then adds the almost inevitable fifth word “but.” His subtle essay is a philosophical balancing act, titled “Toward a Fateful Serenity.”

Of her blithely selfish and self—as well as other—destructive sister, Barbara Oakley asks the big question toward the end of her book: “Did Carolyn have free will in how she led her life?” She concludes, “In some sense, the question is meaningless. Does a cat have a choice when she affectionately licks her kittens?” She would probably reverse Barzun’s sentence, thus: The will is not free, *but* . . . . She says that usually “choices” are like her sister’s: “Carolyn’s choices were a bit like the choices a tree on a windy shoreline has in deciding how tall and how bent to grow.” That’s the *usual*. However, and this is really the crucial point of the book: true, we act as our brains are wired; and her *but* is this: “Research is in fact showing that extraordinary neural shifts can take place through long term conscious efforts” (327–8).

Barbara Oakley’s book is remarkable not only for its argument (talk of “evil empires” and “axes of evil” come to sound increasingly hollow, meaningless, and manipulative) but also for its extraordinary intellectual energy. For one thing, few books have so many, so fascinating, and such *long* footnotes. Here is the end of one such footnote, which stretches over two pages: she is describing “crackpot” scientists and, as a caveat, tells the tale of apparent crackpot Dr. Barry Marshall, who decided ulcers were bacterial—at a time when everyone *knew* ulcers were caused by stress and spicy foods. “Marshall eventually proved his theory by drinking a petri dish of bacteria and giving himself gastritis (and to his wife’s dismay, bad

breath). A dose of antibiotics cured him. Marshall—and his stomach—eventually won the Nobel Prize for his groundbreaking work.” (307)

Oakley’s readers will learn a great deal of biographical information about Hitler, Mao, Stalin, Milosevic, Genghis Khan and many other humans who make us shudder. She wonders aloud how “the successfully sinister” prosper, how the combination of charm, vision, extraordinary powers of memory, and manic energy (characteristics shared by nearly all of the “successfully sinister”) can coalesce into personalities that can wreak such spectacular misery and carnage.

Oakley’s eclectic approach—from careful scientific research to impressionistic biography—may not be wholly persuasive to all. But that eclecticism is the result of her energy, brimming with ideas, information, curious asides, and those fascinating footnotes.

*Evil Genes* explores profound matters with a light touch. Coming from an apparently more fatalistic position, she moves toward Jacques Barzun’s “Fateful Serenity.” Professor Oakley arrives at a kind of fateful humor and compassion. And so much wit, information, provocative speculation are themselves going to produce in her readers, I should think, a whole lot of “extraordinary neural shifting.”