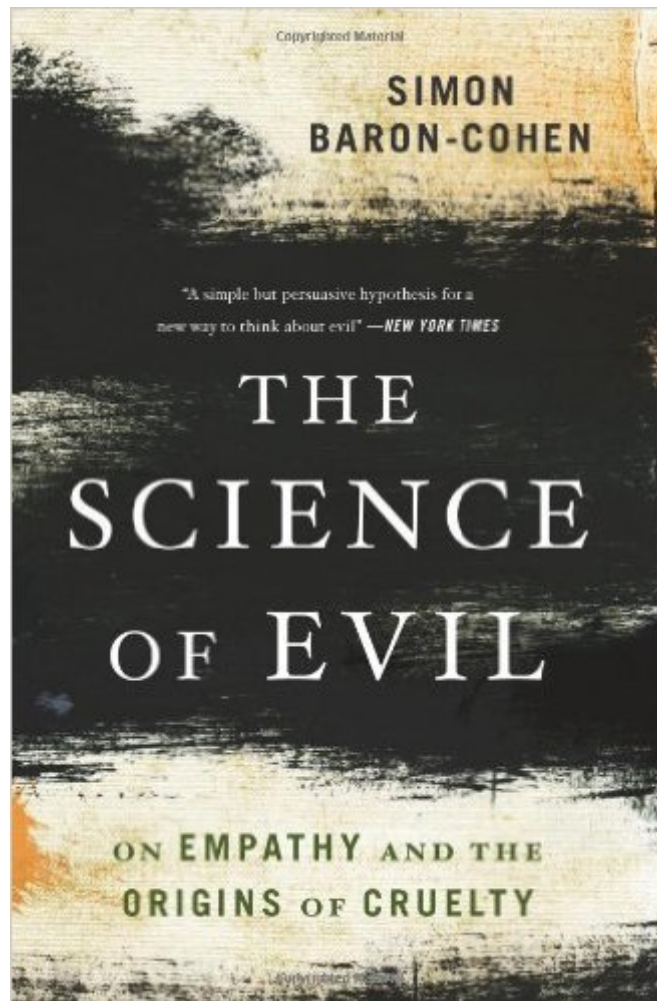


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The Science Of Evil: On Empathy And The Origins Of Cruelty



Synopsis

Borderline personality disorder, autism, narcissism, psychosis, Asperger's: All of these syndromes have one thing in common--lack of empathy. In some cases, this absence can be dangerous, but in others it can simply mean a different way of seeing the world. In *The Science of Evil* Simon Baron-Cohen, an award-winning British researcher who has investigated psychology and autism for decades, develops a new brain-based theory of human cruelty. A true psychologist, however, he examines social and environmental factors that can erode empathy, including neglect and abuse. Based largely on Baron-Cohen's own research, *The Science of Evil* will change the way we understand and treat human cruelty.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

(Post-Sandy Hook tragedy note: Before you read the book or these reviews, you may appreciate watching the YouTube piece on Dr. James Fallon by Reason.tv called "Three Ingredients for Murder: Neuroscientist James Fallon on psychopaths". Of particular interest is the last few minutes which I believe sets out the neurological basis for what Dr. Simon Baron-Cohen calls Zero Positive empathy: the dorsal lateral prefrontal cortex) What could one of the world's leading autism researchers possibly know about evil? Surprisingly--plenty. In the "Science of Evil" Dr. Simon Baron-Cohen has set out to apply scientific rigor to a concept that is all too familiar, but which has received very little serious attention from researchers. Whether it is describing serial killers, terrorists, or political mass murderers, we use the word "evil" without really understanding what it is. "The Science of Evil" takes a big step forward towards providing a scientific explanation for evil. And

surprisingly, the explanation that Dr. Simon Baron-Cohen provides is a natural extension of his autism research and is solidly grounded in brain science. In "The Essential Difference" Dr. Baron-Cohen described his autism research and theory that there is a continuum with autism on one end of the spectrum, and extreme empathy on the other. People on the autism end, also known as systemizers, have superior pattern recognition skills, but lack the ability to perceive and appropriately respond to the mental and emotional states of others. Think "Rainman." So what does this have to do with evil? For Baron-Cohen, the core condition shared by those we call "evil" is a failure of the empathy system--a brain system that allows us to know how others feel, and care about those feelings.

Two things to start off with. I am a researcher but not a forensic psychologist (although I've read a lot of its scientific literature) and I greatly admire the author's research on Theory of Mind and autism. Unfortunately, that's where he should have stayed. This book is well-intended, but is also a mish-mash of theories and concepts that illustrate the author's lack of familiarity with the literature and theories he describes as he overlooks, confuses, and/or conflates important research. His argument is that researchers have overlooked the importance of empathy in studying evil. Despite the fact that psychopathy researchers have noted, and studied that, for decades, he pretends (or really thinks?) that he's come up with something new here. Frick developed the Callous Unemotional traits that includes a lack of empathy. Book has talked about Callous Empathy as a descriptor of psychopathy. So forensic researchers have known about the issue of empathy. Coined years ago, the "Dark Triad" of Psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and Narcissism is a recognition of the links between these different facets of "evil". Baron-Cohen calls his new empathy link between two of these traits "blindingly-obvious". It should be, because it's been recognized for decades now! So Baron-Cohen is really reinventing the wheel here. Worse in fact, as he leaves out the troubling (for his theory) case of Machiavellians, who can flip back and forth between empathy as it suits their needs. And he reinvents a really odd (oval?) wheel by referring to psychopathy, borderline, and narcissism as being negative zero-empathy while autism is positive zero-empathy. Because everyone would chose to "cure" the first three if they could (although I'm quite sure psychopaths and narcissists wouldn't!

The stated goal of this book is to provide a psycho-physiological explanation of why some people are evil. The basis for the explanation is empathy that is defined at the start of Chapter 2: Empathy occurs when we suspend our single-minded focus of attention and instead adopt a double-minded

focus of attention. The ability of empathizing follows a bell curve distribution in the population and individuals and that continuous distribution is mapped arbitrarily into seven levels (why seven?). Individuals at level 6 are very solicitous of other people's needs. Individuals at level 0 are those with no empathy at all and some of them will hurt another person without any qualms. The book goes on to identify several regions of the human brain that are more active in individuals with high empathy than in those with low empathy. Not all individuals with low empathy are evil and Chapter 3 is titled "When Zero Degrees of Empathy is Negative". Having "zero degrees of empathy" is introduced as a synonym of having 0 level empathy and the author does not explain why the new term is needed. It seems to make it easier to create catchy phrases and that points to one problem I have with the book. Making an impression takes precedence over documenting an argument. The chapter identifies three types of "zero-negative" individuals: Borderline, Psychopath, and Narcissist and provides examples of individuals in each category. The author concedes that these categories are already well established in psychiatry and but he claims to be the first to identify them as being manifestations of a single disorder: zero level empathy. There is a detail discussion of the causes of the disorder and good arguments are given that the causes are both genetic and environmental.

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