

Moods and Passions

The hunt is on - it has never stopped - for criminal genes, nifty neurons, and classy chemicals that will make us perfect - or at least explain why we are not.

In his great novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), Dostoevsky's central character Ivan, the brother who pushes reason to its limit, finally concludes that if God is dead, "everything is permitted." If there is no ultimate good in the universe against which to measure our behaviour, then men will decide for themselves what is good.

By the end of the 19th. century, in the hands of the German Friedrich Nietzsche, this idea of creating our own standard of good - making ourselves perfect - became the philosophy of the Superman, the heroic individual who shapes the world through his own will, and thus lives beyond good and evil. (Apologists for Hitler's Nazism relied on such thinking to deplore the "slave religion," Christianity, because it preaches the imperfection of man, and requires obedience to a moral code that protects the weak.)

It happened that one of the most famous scientists in Europe at the same time was the Frenchman Claude Bernard, whose experiments held hope, for those basking in the aftermath of Darwinism, of some material explanation for human behaviour that would do away with the need for God altogether. Man would be made perfect by science.

Dostoevsky mocks this notion through Ivan's colourful pagan brother, Dimitry, whose thoughts are a parody of our modern Human Genome Project - that ultimate scientific safari in search of the genetic god within:

"Well, imagine: the nerves in the head. I mean the nerves in the brain...have sort of little tails, and, well, as soon as the little tails of those nerves begin to quiver...an image appears...that is, an object or an event. That's why I contemplate and then think - because of the little tails, and not at all because I have a soul...science is a wonderful thing! A new man is coming."

What Dostoevsky ridiculed was physical determinism; the emerging notion - essential to atheists - that everything we are results from an unbroken sequence of physical events beyond our control, starting with the smallest - the quivering little tail, or gene, or atom.

It is important to connect the two conclusions (everything is permitted; our actions arise from little tails) to the consequent idea that everything must also be forgiven. After all, those who live beyond good and evil do not want a conscience. Those whose actions are determined, do not need one. If it's all in the genes, or in Prozac, or Ritalin, or the hypothalamus, then, indeed, all can be forgiven...can't it? The poet T.S. Eliot explained this urge best when he wrote that such moral utopians are "dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good."

Meanwhile, the great embarrassment is that our modern liberal democracies have lavished more money on murderers, thieves, assaulters, rapists, teen pregnancies, runaway husbands,

illegitimate births, drug and sex abusers, and pedophiles (all of whom have offended against morality) than has been spent on their likes in the whole prior history of the world - only to produce vastly more of these things! Lavishing money on immoral behaviour creates as much of it as we care to tolerate.

For the whole ancient pagan era, Fate, issuing from the capriciousness of the gods, was fingered as the ultimate cause of wins or woes. Our destiny was something decided outside ourselves, only vaguely decipherable from the mysterious warnings of oracles, by the reading of entrails, or by tearing out the beating hearts of sacrificed maidens.

What postmodern, cutting-edge scientists are really searching for is no longer a social or economic cause - a fate - outside us, but a new, jazzed-up, quivering little tail. A fate inside us. Not the mere sign of evil, but the evil thing itself. Then they will medicate, excise, or re-design the evil thing. They will exert the will to create the Superman, free, at last, from the need to be good.

The strange paradox is that what has distinguished the Christian ethos for two millennia is its repudiation of many capricious gods, for one perfect and demanding God. It is man who is imperfect, and human evil comes not from fate, but from misuse of the human will, from inside ourselves, in a directly controllable inner spiritual form. All individuals, rich and poor alike, are equal in this capacity for moral agency. Human evil is not a thing, nor caused by a thing, whether a pagan god, or a little tail. On this precept was built the glory of western law and civilization. What the scientists fail to see is that while chemicals or lobotomies may alter our moods, this does not mean we have to engage in particular behaviours. Moods and feelings themselves are intransitive. They require no necessary object or action until, in a moment of choice, we decide upon, or give in to one. And all such decisions are based on values.

In a fit of depression or anger a man may decide to satisfy his mood by killing someone or, more hopefully, by going for a run. Or maybe by resolving his anger and learning about love. Our moods and passions may not always be free, but our decisions are - even the decision to enslave ourselves to our moods and passions.

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