

## Objections to Simon Baron-Cohen's *The Science of Evil*

### 1. Introduction

In *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty*,<sup>1</sup> British clinical psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen, an evil-skeptic, argues in favor of substituting the unscientific term “evil” with the scientifically palatable term “empathy erosion”.<sup>2</sup>

Evil-skepticism is the view that the concept of evil should be abandoned in our moral, political, and legal discourse and thinking.<sup>3</sup> Baron-Cohen begins *The Science of Evil* by saying “In this book I attempt to redefine “evil” in terms of the erosion of [affective]<sup>4</sup> *empathy* and look at why some people have more or less [affective] empathy than others and what happens when we lose it.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Baron-Cohen asserts “My main goal is to understand human cruelty, replacing the unscientific term “evil” with the term “empathy erosion.””<sup>6</sup>

Baron-Cohen's argument that “evil” can be reduced to the term “empathy erosion” is an oversimplification.<sup>7</sup> Substituting “evil” with “the erosion of empathy” is an oversimplification because the narrow concept of evil (i.e., morally reprehensible actions

---

<sup>1</sup> Originally published as *Zero Degrees of Empathy: A New Theory of Human Cruelty* (Allen Lane; 1 January 2011). ISBN 978-0-7139-9791-0.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Baron-Cohen. *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty*. ‘Chapter 1: Explaining “Evil” and Human Cruelty’. Basic Books; Second Trade Paperback Edition (7 June 2022). ISBN-13: 978-1-5416-0148-2. Page 7.

<sup>3</sup> Todd Calder. “The Concept of Evil”. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/concept-evil/>.

<sup>4</sup> “Now, in *The Science of Evil*, I examine how some people become capable of cruelty and whether a loss of affective empathy inevitably has this consequence.” Simon Baron-Cohen. *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty*. ‘Acknowledgments’. Basic Books; Second Trade Paperback Edition (7 June 2022). ISBN-13: 978-1-5416-0148-2. Pages xvii-xviii.

<sup>5</sup> Simon Baron-Cohen. *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty*. ‘Acknowledgments’. Basic Books; Second Trade Paperback Edition (7 June 2022). ISBN-13: 978-1-5416-0148-2. Page xv.

<sup>6</sup> Simon Baron-Cohen. *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty*. ‘Acknowledgments’. Basic Books; Second Trade Paperback Edition (7 June 2022). ISBN-13: 978-1-5416-0148-2. Page xviii.

<sup>7</sup> “You oversimplify when you cover up relevant complexities or make a complicated problem appear to be too much simpler than it really is.” Bradley Dowden. “Fallacies.” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. [iep.utm.edu/fallacy/#Oversimplification](http://iep.utm.edu/fallacy/#Oversimplification). Accessed 30 May 2023.

committed by culpable moral agents)<sup>8</sup> cannot be explained solely vis-à-vis the inactivity of certain neural circuits in the human brain that are associated with empathy (e.g., empirically observable brain activity in the amygdala, anterior insula, anterior cingulate cortex, and inferior frontal gyrus).<sup>9</sup> <sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the erosion of empathy is not *necessary* (as Baron-Cohen claims) for the commitment of evil actions or personhood.<sup>11</sup>

While the terms “evil” and “empathy erosion” are not mutually exclusive, they are not inextricable either. If one can conceive of culpable moral agents<sup>12</sup> who commit evil actions *without* experiencing the erosion of empathy as well as moral agents who are incapable of committing evil actions *despite* being bereft of affective empathy, then one cannot reduce “evil” to “empathy erosion” per Baron-Cohen’s account.

The primary concern in this paper is to demonstrate that Baron-Cohen’s post-theoanthological and secular theory of evil is unsatisfactory. Firstly, the worry that Baron-Cohen’s attempt to scientize the concept of evil impedes upon the magisterium of

---

<sup>8</sup> Todd Calder. ‘The Concept of Evil’. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/concept-evil/>.

<sup>9</sup> “Several studies of adult criminal psychopaths and children at risk of developing psychopathy have reported differences in the structure of the brain areas associated with emotion processing and empathy, including the amygdala, anterior insula, anterior cingulate cortex, and inferior frontal gyrus (Figure 5).” Essi Viding. *Psychopathy: A Very Short Introduction*. ‘Unempathetic brains.’ Chapter 2: Explaining the lack of empathy.” Pages 35-36. Oxford University Press (January 1, 2020). ISBN-13: 978-0198802266.

<sup>10</sup> “Imagine that I was to pop you into an fMRI machine\* and then present you with the two dilemmas. What would I observe as you went about negotiating their mischievous moral minefields? Well, around the time that the nature of the dilemma crossed the border from impersonal to personal, I would see your amygdala and related brain circuits—your medial orbitofrontal cortex, for example—light up like a pinball machine. I would witness the moment, in other words, when emotion puts its money in the slot.” Kevin Dutton. *The Wisdom of Psychopaths: What Saints, Spies, and Serial Killers Can Teach Us About Success*. ‘Trolleyology.’ “Scorpio Rising.” *Scientific American / Farrar, Straus and Giroux*; Reprint edition (September 3, 2013). ISBN-13: 978-0374533984. Pages 17-18.

<sup>11</sup> “My claim is that low [affective] empathy is necessary but not sufficient for acts of cruelty.” Simon Baron-Cohen. *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty*. ‘Chapter 1: Explaining “Evil” and Human Cruelty’. Basic Books; Second Trade Paperback Edition (7 June 2022). ISBN-13: 978-1-5416-0148-2. Page 15.

<sup>12</sup> “A moral agent is a person who has the ability to discern right from wrong and to be held accountable for his or her own actions”. “Moral Agency”. *Ethics Unwrapped* (Glossary). The McCombs School of Business at The University of Texas at Austin. <https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/glossary/moral-agent>. Accessed 25 March 2024.

religion and is thus beyond the scope of scientific inquiry is addressed. Because such worries do not immediately disqualify Baron-Cohen's account of evil vis-à-vis the narrow concept of evil, two nomologically possible thought experiments are proffered as an argument to demonstrate that "evil" and "empathy erosion" are not inextricable terms as Baron-Cohen's theory of evil suggests. The first thought experiment involves a hypothetical religious sect whose membership consists of culpable moral agents who commit evil actions *without* experiencing the erosion of empathy. The second thought experiment involves a modification of David J. Chalmers' philosophical Vulcan thought experiment that demonstrates the conceivability of a moral agent who is a moral saint *despite* lacking the capacity for affective empathy. Thought Experiment I and Thought Experiment II in conjunction give rise to the notion that "evil" and "empathy erosion" are not inextricable terms; morally reprehensible actions perpetrated by culpable moral agents and the absence of affective empathy can occur independently of each other. If a culpable moral agent possesses a susceptibility toward committing morally reprehensible acts of cruelty, then it is not the case that the culpable moral agent in question must lose their affective empathy (Thought Experiment I). Thought Experiment I specifically gives rise to the notion that the absence of affective empathy is *not* a necessary condition for the commitment of morally reprehensible actions by culpable moral agents as Baron-Cohen claims.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, if a culpable moral agent lacks affective empathy, then it is not the case that the culpable moral agent in question must possess a susceptibility toward committing morally reprehensible acts of cruelty or be regarded as an instance in which "zero-degrees of empathy" is a negative phenomenon

---

<sup>13</sup> Simon Baron-Cohen. *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty*. 'Chapter 1: Explaining "Evil" and Human Cruelty'. Basic Books; Second Trade Paperback Edition (7 June 2022). ISBN-13: 978-1-5416-0148-2. Page 15.

(Thought Experiment II). Ergo, the concept of evil cannot be explained solely in relation to the inactivity of certain neural circuits in the human brain that are associated with empathy (i.e., empathy erosion).

## 2. Is The Concept of Evil Outside the Domain of Scientific Inquiry?

Some proponents of evil-skepticism claim that the concept of evil necessitates references to supernatural agents, dark forces, and creatures.<sup>14</sup> Regarding the objective to redefine “evil” as “empathy erosion”, Baron-Cohen asserts “My aim in this book has been to restimulate discussion on the causes of evil by moving the debate out of the realm of religion and into the realm of science.”<sup>15</sup> If the initial concept of evil that Baron-Cohen is attempting to redefine is theological and supernatural in origin (thus belonging to the magisterium of religion and beyond the scope of scientific inquiry), then the concept of evil cannot be redefined with respect to activity (or lack thereof) of certain neural circuits in the human brain that are associated with empathy per Stephen Jay Gould’s Non-overlapping Magisteria (NOMA). NOMA posits that religion and science constitute two separate domains of intellectual inquiry.<sup>16</sup> Baron-Cohen’s attempts to redefine a concept that is ostensibly theological or supernatural in origin potentially suffers the same issue as the “No Designer Worth His Salt” objection to Intelligent Design (ID).<sup>17</sup> The common argument between all “No Designer Worth His Salt”

---

<sup>14</sup> Todd Calder. “The Concept of Evil”. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/concept-evil/>.

<sup>15</sup> Simon Baron-Cohen. *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty*. 'Chapter 6: Reflections on Human Cruelty'. Basic Books; Second Trade Paperback Edition (7 June 2022). ISBN-13: 978-1-5416-0148-2. Page 151.

<sup>16</sup> “The net of science covers the empirical universe: what is it made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory). The net of religion extends over questions of moral reasoning and value. These two magisteria do not overlap, nor do they encompass all inquiry (consider, for starters, the magisterium of art and the meaning of beauty).” Stephen Jay Gould. “Nonoverlapping Magisteria”. Page 741-742. Originally published in *Natural History* (1997, March).

<sup>17</sup> Intelligent design (noun): ‘the theory that life, or the universe, cannot have arisen by chance and was designed and created by some intelligent entity.’ *Oxford Languages*.

objections to ID posit “since no designer worth his salt (Raddick 2005) would produce the many imperfect adaptations we observe in nature, creationism is false.”<sup>18</sup> Elliot Sober argues that this criticism concedes that creationism is testable.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, Baron-Cohen’s attempts to redefine the concept of evil in terms of the hard sciences mistakenly and unwittingly concedes that a concept that is supernatural in origin can be empirically corroborated and observed with respect to the inactivity of certain neural circuits in the human brain. Supernatural concepts cannot be reduced in terms of natural processes because such concepts were not empirically observable to begin with by virtue of their metaphysical status; if evil is an intrinsically supernatural concept, then evil belongs to the realm of the extramundane and cannot be subject to empirical scrutiny.

In the paper “Balderdash and Chicanery: Science and Beyond” by Andrew Aberdein, Aberdein identifies a threefold taxonomy of how fictional works approach supernatural phenomena; one of the three approaches identified describes fictional works that reduce the supernatural to contemporary science.<sup>20</sup> In contradistinction to this approach regarding fictional worlds, our world is unlike the fictional universes exemplified by George Lucas’ *Star Wars* prequel trilogy or John Carpenter’s 1987 film *Prince of Darkness* where such phenomena (i.e., “dark forces” and supernatural phenomena in general) are empirically observable and a part of their natural world.

Despite the worry that Baron-Cohen’s efforts to redefine “evil” as “empathy erosion” impedes upon the magisterium of religion (thus being beyond the scope of

---

<sup>18</sup> Elliot Sober. “What is wrong with intelligent design?”. *The Quarterly Review of Biology*. March 2007; Volume 82 (No. 1):3-8. doi: 10.1086/511656. PMID: 17354991. Page 4.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Aberdein, Andrew. “Chapter 6: Balderdash and Chicanery: Science and Beyond.” James South (ed.), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy: Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale*. Open Court; First Edition, First Printing (March 1, 2003). ISBN-13: 978-0812695311. Page 81.

scientific inquiry) or mistakenly and unwittingly concedes that a concept that is supernatural in origin can be empirically observed, this does not immediately disqualify Baron-Cohen's secular ponerology with respect to the narrow concept of evil as a byproduct of strictly empirical phenomena. Such concerns do not immediately disqualify Baron-Cohen's secular ponerology because one can engage in discourse surrounding the idea that morally reprehensible actions are committed by culpable moral agents (i.e., the narrow concept of evil) without appealing to the controvertible existence of supernatural evil. This now leads us to two nomologically possible thought experiments that demonstrate that "evil" and "empathy erosion" are not inextricable concepts.

### 3. Thought Experiment I: The Case of the Reprobatis

The first thought experiment adduced herein introduces a hypothetical religious sect that practices a heterodox variant of Calvinism called Reprobatism:

The practitioners of Reprobatism consist of culpable moral agents who commit evil actions without experiencing the erosion of empathy. Reprobatism is a [hypothetical] heterodoxical Calvinist sect clandestinely formed at an unknown date (presumably sometime during the 16th century) by excommunicated and defrocked Calvinist clergymen who were branded to be "reprobates"<sup>21</sup> due to their proclivity towards committing acts which could be construed by many to be exemplifications of *prima facie* "evil".<sup>22</sup> Despite this proclivity towards committing acts which could be construed to be exemplifications of *prima facie*

---

<sup>21</sup> Reprobate, noun. (in Calvinism) a sinner who is not of the elect and is predestined to damnation. Reprobate, adjective. (in Calvinism) predestined to damnation. Origin: late Middle English (as a verb): from Latin *reprobat-* 'disapproved', from the verb *reprobare*, from *re-* (expressing reversal) + *probare* 'approve'. *Oxford Languages*.

<sup>22</sup> The term "prima facie 'evil'" is adopted from *Evil: A Very Short Introduction* by Luke Russell. Chapter 1: The Philosophical Puzzle of Evil. Oxford University Press (January 27, 2023). ISBN-13: 978-0198819271. Page 14.

“evil”, the individuals who would eventually constitute this outré sect remained staunch theological determinists.<sup>23</sup> Because they remained staunch theological determinists and were able to come to terms with (what they believed to be) their ostensibly fixed nature as reprobates, they formed their own heterodoxical sect in order to justify their cosmic purpose as reprobates.

Reprobatists adhere to a wicked theology in which they believe that despite being inundated by their love for God, they were cursed with an unrepentant propensity towards committing evil actions because their existence (i.e., the existence of reprobates) is the necessary condition (or a “necessary evil”) for the Elect<sup>24</sup> to reach Heaven, thus repudiating any notion of universal reconciliation (the eschatological belief that everybody will be subjected to salvation during the Final Days).

Throughout the centuries since their arcane founding, the Reprobatists stalk the cities and countrysides of continental Europe, the British Isles, Scandinavia, and North America as they hunt individuals (including women and children) who appear to them to be pious, exhibit the qualities of what one might consider to be *prima facie* “good”, or who they believe to be a member of the Calvinist Elect. When the Reprobatists murder their victims, they sincerely believe that they are transmuting the essence of their victim to a heavenly abode and that they themselves are engaging in an altruistic and preordained action (because they perceive their morally reprehensible actions as being predetermined

---

<sup>23</sup> “Theological determinism is the view that God determines every event that occurs in the history of the world.” Leigh Vicens. “Theological Determinism.” Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://iep.utm.edu/theological-determinism/>. Accessed 30 May 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Elect, noun. (Christian theology) the people chosen by God for salvation. *Oxford Languages*.

by God Himself per theological determinism) that could not have been prevented due to their ostensibly fixed nature as reprobates. Because they believe that their actions are in accordance with the volition of God and that they are merely transferring their victims to a “better place”, if one were to empirically observe the empathy circuits of a practitioner of Reprobatism engaging in the murder of the Elect and *prima facie* “good” individuals through functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI), the activity in their neural circuits associated with empathy would exponentially *increase* [see footnotes 9 and 10 regarding how this might be empirically reflected in their brain-states]. Instead of experiencing an erosion of empathy, the neural pathways associated with empathy in the brains of the wicked Reprobatists as they engage in illicit murder would be hyperactive. Additionally, they perceive themselves to be practicing a form of self-abnegation where they believe that through their murders, they are putting the salvation of others at the focal point of their concern and empathy. Reprobatists are not morally ignorant, as they believe that because of their unrepentant actions and status as reprobates, they are hellbound. The M’Naghten test is “a standard under which a criminal defendant is considered to have been insane at the time of an act (as a killing) if he or she did not know right from wrong or did not understand the moral nature of the act because of a mental disease or defect”.<sup>25</sup> Reprobatists are cognizant that what they are doing is wrong or sinful per their self-concept, but because they are convinced due to their theological convictions that they are sending their murder victims to a “better place”, they experience an increase in

---

<sup>25</sup> Merriam-Webster.com Legal Dictionary, s.v. “M’Naghten test,” Accessed 30 May 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/legal/M%27Naghten%20test>.



empathy. The Reprobatisers reciprocate the emotions of their victims upon murdering them as a result of their hyper-empathy, however, the idea of their victims transferring to a “better place” provides them with solace (thus nullifying any potential for regret even when they are reciprocating negatively valenced affective states in the presence of their victims; reprobates are predetermined by God to damnation, ergo repentance is inutile anyway). The brain-states of the practitioners of Reprobatism in the aforementioned scenarios can be likened to an individual’s forlornness in the presence of a dying loved one while simultaneously being comforted by the alleviation of their pain and transference of their essence to a “better place” except with the commitment of an illicit action simultaneously occurring.

If we can conceive of culpable moral agents who commit evil actions without experiencing the erosion of empathy in a nomologically possible thought experiment, then we have demonstrated that the concept of evil cannot be redefined solely in terms of the erosion of empathy. When Baron-Cohen refers to the erosion of empathy, he is concerned with the loss of empathy in a potentially permanent way.<sup>26</sup> As established in this thought experiment, the practitioners of the atypical sect adduced herein do not experience *any* erosion of empathy; the practitioners of Reprobatism instead experience a state of hyperactive empathy while committing evil actions where an innocent human agent is subjected to harm (e.g., murder) as a result of their theological beliefs and justification as to why the Christian God (as interpreted within the Calvinist tradition) would create

---

<sup>26</sup> Simon Baron-Cohen. *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty*. ‘Chapter 2: The Empathy Mechanism: The Bell Curve’. Basic Books; Second Trade Paperback Edition (7 June 2022). ISBN-13: 978-1-5416-0148-2. Page 21.

moral agents (such as reprobates) who are predestined for eternal torment.

Furthermore, the case of the practitioners of Reprobatism nullifies Baron-Cohen's claim that an erosion of empathy is the *sine qua non* for the commitment of evil actions.

One may object to the claim that the practitioners of Reprobatism are not morally ignorant per the M'Naghten test on the grounds that the Reprobatists' tacit adherence to Divine Command Theory<sup>27</sup> (because there is no evidence that they attempt to escape their perceived fate as reprobates or contest God's authority even it goes against their self-interest) obfuscates their moral compass, thus leading to moral ignorance and absolving the practitioners of Reprobatism of culpability for their heinous crimes. However, the practitioners of Reprobatism as mentioned in the thought experiment believe that because of their status as reprobates, their proclivity toward the commitment of morally reprehensible acts (per their religious beliefs), and negligence toward the act of repentance, they are hellbound; they will not be absolved by God even if they sincerely believe that they are performing the will of God and do not strive to disacknowledge or repudiate the authority of the will of God within the framework of their worldview. To reiterate, it is ultimately their idiosyncratic beliefs as practitioners of a heterodoxical variant of Calvinism that lead to their empirically observable counter-intuitive brain-states during the commitment of their morally reprehensible actions.

---

<sup>27</sup> "Roughly, Divine Command Theory is the view that morality is somehow dependent upon God, and that moral obligation consists in obedience to God's commands. Divine Command Theory includes the claim that morality is ultimately based on the commands or character of God, and that the morally right action is the one that God commands or requires." Michael W. Austin. "Divine Command Theory." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. "<https://iep.utm.edu/divine-command-theory/>. Accessed 25 March 2024.

#### 4. Thought Experiment II: The Philosophical Vulcan-Moral Saint Amalgam

Chalmers defines a *philosophical Vulcan* as a "conscious creature who experiences no happiness, suffering, pleasure, pain, or any other positive or negative affective states."<sup>28</sup> Additionally, Chalmers states that philosophical Vulcans are *not* identical to the Vulcans on *Star Trek*: "The Vulcans on *Star Trek* aren't quite as extreme as this: they experience lust every seven years and experience at least mild pleasures and pains in between."<sup>29</sup> Because philosophical Vulcans are devoid of "all capacity for positively and negatively valenced affective states"<sup>30</sup>, philosophical Vulcans are incapable of experiencing affective or emotional empathy (e.g., feeling another person's happiness or sadness). While Luke Roelofs argues that "if motivation requires affect, then the Vulcans described by Chalmers are impossible", Roelofs does not discount the possibility that, either intentionally or unintentionally, such agents could be created via advancements in artificial intelligence and bioengineering.<sup>31</sup> If such agents can be created through artificial intelligence or bioengineering, then philosophical Vulcans are nomologically possible.

A moral agent who is a philosophical Vulcan *and* a moral saint is conceivable; this conceivable moral agent is the focal point of the second thought experiment adduced herein. In other words, a moral agent who does not contain the capacity for affective empathy yet lives a *modus vivendi* that only consists of supererogatory actions. The supererogatory actions performed by the philosophical Vulcan-Moral Saint

---

<sup>28</sup> David J. Chalmers. *Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy*. W. W. Norton & Company (January 25, 2022). ISBN-13: 978-0393635805. Part 6: Value. 'Chapter 18: Do simulated lives matter?' Pages 343-344.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Luke Roelofs (forthcoming). "Sentientism, Motivation, and Philosophical Vulcans." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*. 2022-07-13. Page 10. <https://philpapers.org/rec/ROESMA>.

<sup>31</sup> Luke Roelofs (forthcoming). "Sentientism, Motivation, and Philosophical Vulcans." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*. 2022-07-13. Pages 1 and 4. <https://philpapers.org/rec/ROESMA>.

amalgam are an exemplification of the acme of radical “good” (as opposed to radical “evil”). Susan Wolf defines a moral saint as “a person whose every action is as morally good as possible, a person, that is, who is as morally worthy as can be.”<sup>32</sup> While it is conceivable that a philosophical Vulcan could be a moral saint as defined by Wolf, this conceivable philosophical Vulcan cannot be a moral saint of the “Loving Saint” classification; a “Loving Saint” might derive an positively affective valenced experience (e.g., pleasure) from promoting the welfare of others. A philosophical Vulcan who also happens to be a moral saint can only be a moral saint of the “Rational Saint” classification, albeit without the capacity for positively and negatively valenced affective states. Ergo, hypothetical Rational Saints who might strive for moral goodness as the *telos* of their existence predicated on “a pathological fear of damnation”<sup>33</sup> or “self-hatred that interferes with his ability to enjoy the enjoyable in life”<sup>34</sup> are incongruent with the philosophical Vulcan who is also a moral saint.

Baron-Cohen states “Now, in *The Science of Evil*, I examine how some people become capable of cruelty and whether a loss of affective empathy inevitably has this consequence.”<sup>35</sup> The instance of the Philosophical Vulcan-Moral Saint amalgam suggests that it is not the case that the loss of affective empathy *inevitably* gives rise to such capabilities. When Baron-Cohen references cases where “zero-degrees of empathy is positive”, he is not referring to zero-degrees of *affective* empathy, but rather

---

<sup>32</sup> Wolf, Susan. “Moral Saints.” *The Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 8 (1982): Page 419. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2026228>.

<sup>33</sup> Wolf, Susan. “Moral Saints.” *The Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 8 (1982): Page 424. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2026228>.

<sup>34</sup> Wolf, Susan. “Moral Saints.” *The Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 8 (1982): Page 424. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2026228>.

<sup>35</sup> Simon Baron-Cohen. *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty*. ‘Acknowledgments’. Basic Books; Second Trade Paperback Edition (7 June 2022). ISBN-13: 978-1-5416-0148-2. Page xvii-xviii.

cognitive empathy<sup>36 37</sup> (e.g., the cases of intellectual savants such as Daniel Tammet and Kim Peek).<sup>38</sup> Additionally, when Baron-Cohen claims that low empathy *does not* inevitably give rise to culpable moral agents that commit acts of cruelty while low empathy *must* be present during the commitment of morally reprehensible actions, he is arguing that low *cognitive* empathy does not inevitably produce culpable moral agents that commit acts of cruelty.<sup>39</sup> To support this position, Baron-Cohen argues that individuals with Asperger syndrome are the mirror-image of individuals with psychopathy (“Psychopaths have intact cognitive empathy but reduced affective empathy, while people with Asperger Syndrome have intact affective empathy but reduced cognitive empathy”).<sup>40</sup> Because Baron-Cohen does not identify cases where zero-degrees of affective empathy *does not* result in the commitment of evil actions or the development of evil personhood, the conceivability of a moral agent who has experienced the erosion of affective empathy yet *does not* commit evil actions (and only

---

<sup>36</sup> “The evidence suggests that autistic people have difficulties with cognitive empathy (imagining another person’s thoughts and feelings) but are intact in their affective empathy (responding to another person’s thoughts and feelings with an appropriate emotion).” Simon Baron-Cohen. *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty*. ‘Foreword’. Basic Books; Second Trade Paperback Edition (7 June 2022). ISBN-13: 978-1-5416-0148-2. Page xii.

<sup>37</sup> “So what goes on in the brains of psychopaths, and how might finding out help us further understand their behaviour? Neuroimaging studies have been conducted on criminal psychopaths, on children at risk of developing psychopathy, and on community samples of adults with varying levels of psychopathic traits. **Collectively these studies yield a relatively consistent picture of underactivity in brain areas that are involved in processing other people’s distress and pain, empathy, and guilt [affective empathy]. By contrast, brain activity related to theory of mind computations [cognitive empathy] that do not require deciphering emotions—in other words, brain activity related to understanding other people’s minds and motivations—appears entirely normal in individuals with psychopathic features.** This is just as we would expect based on their ability to manipulate others.” Essi Viding. *Psychopathy: A Very Short Introduction*. ‘Unempathetic brains.’ “Chapter 2: Explaining the lack of empathy.” Pages 35-36. Oxford University Press (January 1, 2020). ISBN-13: 978-0198802266.

<sup>38</sup> Simon Baron-Cohen. *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty*. ‘Chapter 4: When Zero Degrees of Empathy Is Positive’. Basic Books; Second Trade Paperback Edition (7 June 2022). ISBN-13: 978-1-5416-0148-2. Page 110.

<sup>39</sup> Simon Baron-Cohen. *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty*. ‘Chapter 1: Explaining “Evil” and Human Cruelty’. Basic Books; Second Trade Paperback Edition (7 June 2022). ISBN-13: 978-1-5416-0148-2. Page 15.

<sup>40</sup> Simon Baron-Cohen. *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty*. ‘Chapter 4: When Zero Degrees of Empathy Is Positive’. Basic Books; Second Trade Paperback Edition (7 June 2022). ISBN-13: 978-1-5416-0148-2. Page 109.

acts in congruence with the idea of radical goodness and the commitment of supererogatory actions) is demonstrated in this thought experiment.

## 5. Conclusion

Baron-Cohen's post-theoanthatological and secular theory of evil is problematic. The narrow concept of evil cannot be reduced in terms of the activity or inactivity of certain neural pathways associated with empathy in the human brain. Firstly, there is the worry that redefining the theory of evil in terms of the erosion of affective empathy constitutes an intrusion of the magisterium of science upon the magisterium of religion while tacitly (and erroneously) conceding that a supernatural concept is empirically testable. Secondly, the case of the hypothetical heterodoxical Calvinist sect that practices Reprobation is problematic vis-à-vis Baron-Cohen's claim that a culpable moral agent committing evil actions necessitates the erosion of affective empathy within the neural pathways of the culpable moral agent in question. Thirdly, the case of the hypothetical moral agent who is an amalgamation of a philosophical Vulcan *and* a moral saint is problematic vis-à-vis Baron-Cohen's claim that only moral agents who have experienced an erosion of *cognitive empathy* can be regarded as instances in which zero-degrees of empathy can be a positive phenomenon.

In *The Science of Evil*, Simon Baron-Cohen implicitly supports the following biconditional statement:

“If a culpable moral agent possesses a susceptibility toward committing morally reprehensible acts of cruelty, then the culpable moral agent in question is bereft of affective empathy *and* if a culpable moral agent is bereft of affective empathy, then the culpable moral agent in question possesses a susceptibility

toward committing morally reprehensible acts of cruelty” (A culpable moral agent possesses a susceptibility toward committing morally reprehensible acts of cruelty *if and only if* the culpable moral agent in question is bereft of affective empathy).

The absence of affective empathy does not always give rise to the commitment of evil actions or evil personhood (vide Thought Experiment II), nor is the absence of affective empathy the *sine qua non* for the commitment of evil actions or evil personhood (vide Thought Experiment I).

While one might be tempted to repudiate the thought experiments adduced herein as refutations of Baron-Cohen’s secular ponerology on the grounds that they constitute anomalous cases with respect to the human condition, it is incumbent that subsequent essays toward a secular ponerology anticipate advancements in artificial intelligence and bioengineering that will engender the culpable moral agent introduced in Thought Experiment II outside of theoretical discourse as well as account for sincerely held beliefs that violate our intuitive thinking about the commitment of acts of cruelty and other forms of moral reprehensibility and how such acts might be reflected in the neural pathways of culpable moral agents (vide Thought Experiment I).

## Bibliography

Aberdein, Andrew. "Chapter 6: Balderdash and Chicanery: Science and Beyond."

James South (ed.), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy: Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale*. Open Court; First Edition, First Printing (March 1, 2003). ISBN-13: 978-0812695311.

Austin, Michael W. "Divine Command Theory." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

<https://iep.utm.edu/divine-command-theory/>. Accessed 25 March 2024

Baron-Cohen, Simon. *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty*.

Basic Books; Second Trade Paperback Edition (7 June 2022). ISBN-13:

978-1-5416-0148-2.

Calder, Todd. "The Concept of Evil". *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.).

<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/concept-evil/>.

Chalmers, David J. *Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy*. W. W.

Norton & Company (January 25, 2022). ISBN-13: 978-0393635805. Pages 343-344.

Dowden, Bradley. "Fallacies." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

[iep.utm.edu/fallacy/#Oversimplification](http://iep.utm.edu/fallacy/#Oversimplification). Accessed 30 May 2023.

Dutton, Kevin. *The Wisdom of Psychopaths: What Saints, Spies, and Serial Killers Can Teach Us About Success*. Scientific American / Farrar, Straus and Giroux; Reprint

edition (September 3, 2013). ISBN-13: 978-0374533984.

"Elect, noun. (Christian theology)." *Oxford Languages*.

Gould, Stephen Jay. "Nonoverlapping Magisteria". Page 741-742. Originally published in *Natural History* (1997, March).



“Intelligent design (noun).” *Oxford Languages*.

Merriam-Webster.com Legal Dictionary, s.v. “M’Naghten test,” Accessed 30 May 2023,  
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/legal/M%27Naghten%20test>.

“Moral Agency.” *Ethics Unwrapped* (Glossary). The McCombs School of Business at  
 The University of Texas at Austin.

<https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/glossary/moral-agent>. Accessed 25 March 2024.

“Reprobate, adjective.” *Oxford Languages*.

“Reprobate, noun.” *Oxford Languages*.

Roelofs, Luke (forthcoming). “Sentientism, Motivation, and Philosophical Vulcans.”

*Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*. 2022-07-13. Page 10.

<https://philpapers.org/rec/ROESMA>.

Russell, Luke. *Evil: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press (January 27,  
 2023). ISBN-13: 978-0198819271.

Sober, Elliot. “What is wrong with intelligent design?”. *The Quarterly Review of Biology*.  
 March 2007; Volume 82 (No. 1):3-8. doi: 10.1086/511656. PMID: 17354991.

Vicens, Leigh. “Theological Determinism.” Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

<https://iep.utm.edu/theological-determinism/>. Accessed 30 May 2023.

Viding, Essi. *Psychopathy: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press (January  
 1, 2020). ISBN-13: 978-0198802266.

Wolf, Susan. “Moral Saints.” *The Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 8 (1982).

<https://doi.org/10.2307/2026228>.