

Society Is Fixed, Biology Is Mutable

Posted on September 10, 2014 by Scott Alexander



Today during an otherwise terrible lecture on ADHD I realized something important we get sort of backwards.

There's this stereotype that the Left believes that human characteristics are socially determined, and therefore mutable. And social problems are easy to fix, through things like education and social services and [public awareness campaigns](#) and "calling people out", and so we have a responsibility to fix them, thus radically improving society and making life better for everyone.

But the Right (by now I guess the far right) believes human characteristics are *biologically* determined, and biology is fixed. Therefore we shouldn't bother trying to improve things, and any attempt is just utopianism or "immanentizing the eschaton" or a shady justification for tyranny and busybodyness.

And I think I reject this whole premise.

See, my terrible lecture on ADHD suggested several reasons for the increasing prevalence of the disease. Of these I remember two: the spiritual desert of modern adolescence, and insufficient

iron in the diet. And I remember thinking “Man, I hope it’s the iron one, because that seems a *lot* easier to fix.”

Society is *really hard to change*. We figured drug use was “just” a social problem, and it’s *obvious* how to solve social problems, so we gave kids nice little lessons in school about how you should Just Say No. There were advertisements in sports and video games about how Winners Don’t Do Drugs. And just in case that didn’t work, the cherry on the social engineering sundae was putting all the drug users in jail, where they would have a lot of time to think about what they’d done and be so moved by the prospect of further punishment that they would come clean.

And that is why, even to this day, nobody uses drugs.

On the other hand, biology is gratifyingly easy to change. Sometimes it’s just giving people more iron supplements. But the best example is lead. Banning lead was probably kind of controversial at the time, but in the end some refineries probably had to change their refining process and some gas stations had to put up “UN-LEADED” signs and then we were done. And crime dropped like fifty percent in a couple of decades – including many forms of drug abuse.

Saying “Tendency toward drug abuse is primarily determined by fixed brain structure” sounds callous, like you’re abandoning drug abusers to die. But maybe it means you can fight the problem head-on instead of forcing kids to attend more and more useless

classes where cartoon animals sing about how happy they are not using cocaine.

What about obesity? We put a *lot* of social effort into fighting obesity: labeling foods, banning soda machines from school, banning large sodas from New York, programs in schools to promote healthy eating, doctors chewing people out when they gain weight, the profusion of gyms and Weight Watchers programs, and let's not forget a level of stigma against obese people so strong that I am *constantly* having to deal with their weight-related suicide attempts. As a result, everyone... keeps gaining weight at exactly the same rate they have been for the past couple decades. Wouldn't it be nice if increasing obesity was driven at least in part by [changes in the intestinal microbiota](#) that we could reverse through careful antibiotic use? Or by trans-fats?

What about poor school performance? From the social angle, we try No Child Left Behind, Common Core Curriculum, stronger teachers' unions, weaker teachers' unions, more pay for teachers, less pay for teachers, more prayer in school, banning prayer in school, condemning racism, condemning racism even more, et cetera. But the poorest fifth or so of kids [show spectacular cognitive gains from multivitamin supplementation](#), and doctors continue [to tell everyone schools should start later so children can get enough sleep](#) and continue to be totally ignored despite [strong evidence in favor](#).

Even the most politically radioactive biological explanation – genetics – doesn't seem that scary to me. The more things turn out to

be genetic, the more I support universal funding for implantable contraception that allow people to choose when they do or don't want children – thus breaking the cycle where people too impulsive or confused to use contraception have more children and increase frequency of those undesirable genes. I think I'd have a heck of a lot easier a time changing gene frequency in the population than you would changing people's locus of control or self-efficacy or whatever, even if I wasn't allowed to do anything immoral (except by very silly religious standards of "immoral").

I'm not saying that all problems are purely biological and none are social. But I do worry there's a consensus that biological things are unfixable but social things are easy – or that social solutions are morally unambiguous but biological solutions necessarily monstrous – and so for any given biological/social breakdown of a problem, we figure we might as well put all our resources into attacking the more tractable social side and dismiss the biological side. I think there's a sense in which that's backwards, and in which it's possible to marry scientific rigor with human compassion for the evils of the world.