
The Gods Are Anxious

The Delightful Rise of Genetic Polytheism

by Louis Menand

It turns out, according to an article published last month in the journal *Science* and reported on the front page of the *Times*, that there is a gene for anxiety. It seems that people who are fretful, crabby, and neurotic—"kvetches," in the *Times's* translation into regional dialect—tend to have a shorter version of a certain gene (SLC6A4 on chromosome 17q12, if you want to look it up) than do people of sunny disposition. If you're a worrier, in other words, it's not because you have a lot of things in your life to worry about; it's just because you're a worrier. Feel better now? Of course not. You *can't* feel better: that's the whole point.

The discovery of the worry gene follows closely on the discovery, earlier this year, of the "What, me worry?" (or "bungee-jumping") gene, the gene associated with the taste for novelty and excitement. The report announcing the gene for novelty now seems to be the subject of some dispute among scientists, and possibly this new report on the gene for anxiety will run into similar criticism. But one hopes not, for it must be said that these gene-based explanations of personality are immensely clarifying contributions to thought. Readers of the

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Times article on the gene for neuroticism, for example, must have wondered why, if this sort of behavior is genetically determined, New York City has so much of it. The answer must be that New Yorkers are not neurotic because they live in New York; they live in New York because they're neurotic.

Once this principle has been grasped, many prejudices fall away. People are not passionate because they're Italian as the old and vulgar view of human nature once had it; they're Italian because they're passion-

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ate. Cabdrivers are not impatient because they're cabdrivers; they're cabdrivers because they're impatient. Taking care of small children does not make people feel stressed out; feeling stressed out is what makes people take care of small children. And so on. This is determinism, but determinism of a deeply appealing kind, for it reverses the usual relation between accident and necessity in human life. We used to think of our moods and tastes as mere by-products of the social and personal rela-

tions we happened to be stuck in. Now we can see that the social and personal relations we happen to be stuck in are only the accidental consequences of our moods and tastes. Many are born impatient; the lucky ones become cabdrivers. The animus seeks its animal. The circularity is breathtaking. It is as though scientists were to explain the behavior of the mosquito by showing it to have a gene for being annoying.

The ascription of personality traits to genetic make-up is one instance of a much larger trend, which is the reemergence of polytheism. A long time ago, things were explained by reference to the will of unseen deities—to struggles among the gods and goddesses of love, war, wisdom, excess, and so forth. How silly and primitive that all was. Now we explain things by reference to an abbreviated SLC6A4 gene on chromosome 17q12, and feel much superior for it. But there is not, if you think about it, that much difference between saying “The gods are angry” and saying “He has the gene for anger.” Both are ways of attributing a matter of personal agency to some fateful and mysterious impersonal power.

In between the old polytheism and the new polytheism there were, of course, a number of fairly successful monotheisms. In between “Circe put a spell on him” and “his dopamine made him do it” (that’s the neurotransmitter associated with bungee-jumping) there were, besides the major religious monotheisms, “Her subconscious rage against her parents made her do it,” and several other single-term explanations for why people do what they do. Many people today are skeptical of those single-term explanations, and, on the whole, with good reason. Polytheism is a lot more appealing.

For one thing, it is a very indeterminate kind of determinism. If Circe put a spell on you, there was always some other godling around who could take it off. And so it is with genes. Human beings have between fifty and a hundred thousand of them, in billions of combinations, and while one little gene is firing off a signal to bite your fingernails ten other genes may be pumping out the neurochemical equivalent of soothing music. The scientists who found this gene for anxiety, the *Times* says, “suspect that anywhere from nine to fourteen other genes, as well as many environmental factors that have yet to be sorted out, come into

play in making one person anxious, another calm.” That’s covering one’s bets pretty thoroughly.

The interesting thing to watch in the rise of gene-based polytheism will be its confrontation with the other big polytheism of the day, which is cultural polytheism—the “his epistemology made him do it” explanation. For what is wired into the personality cannot readily be transformed by cultural input: the software

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can’t reconfigure the hardware. The view that behavior is determined by an inherited genetic package is not easily reconciled with the view that behavior is determined by the kinds of movies a person watches. Most people are likely to want to believe in a little of both—to think that people are pretty much the way they are, and also that reading aloud from *The Book of Virtues* can make them a bit better—but these are very different belief systems. It is like having the Greek gods and the Inca gods occupying the same pantheon. Somebody’s got to go.

Maybe they’ll all go. Maybe they’ll just kill each other off, or cancel each other out. After all, when there are any number of possible deterministic explanations for behavior there might as well be none. The dream of finding an extra-personal explanation for the course of human life is very old, and it promises relief from the burden of responsibility that each person feels in making a choice and taking the risk that it will be a bad one. Sometimes the dream is sweet—a dream of providential design or evolutionary perfectionism. Sometimes it’s a nightmare of atoms colliding blindly with atoms, or of brains suspended in a vat. In the end, though, people have to figure things out for themselves. Go ahead. Ask your genes what to do. You might as well be asking Zeus. Is there a program running our lives? We should be so lucky.