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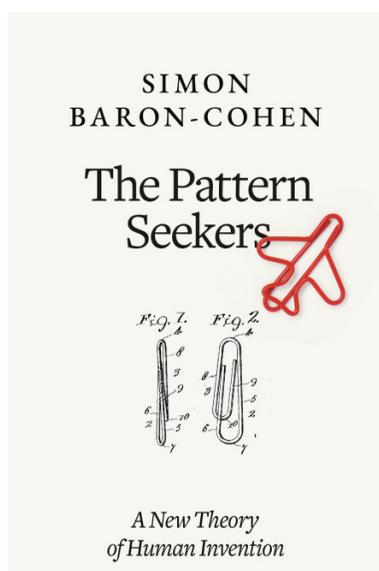
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# The Genius of Neurodivergency

*The Pattern Seekers: A New Theory of Human Invention* by Simon Baron-Cohen (Allen Lane, 2020)

“I don’t care that they stole my idea. I care that they don’t have any of their own!” –Nikola Tesla



The existential humorist Steve Wright once described a “peripheral visionary” as “someone who can see the future, but only way off to the sides.” These visionaries—oddballs, eccentrics, and outsiders—have transformed our world with their inventions, and they seem more important today than ever. In his newest book, *The Pattern Seekers*, Simon Baron-Cohen examines the huge landscape of these outsider thinkers, many of whom will go unrecognized, their contributions coming long before the invention of writing, itself only four or five thousand years old.

The fact is, there is truth to the popular old adage that people who behave rarely make history. We might add that people who don’t play well with others sometimes come up with startling and groundbreaking insights. Baron-Cohen’s book focuses on this fringe element, arguing that normal (neurotypical) people have benefitted from what outsiders (atypical) people discover by thinking beyond the so-called “box.” Such innovators don’t even know where the box is, let alone whether or not they’re inside or outside of it.

Baron-Cohen’s argument is based on a shockingly simple premise: human beings are unique among sentient beings, distinct from other creatures because we possess a single special trait—the ability to look for and discern, identify, and redistribute patterns. The most important pattern formation, for Simon-Cohen, is also the simplest one, what he calls the “if-and-then” pattern. This he defines as the ability to surmise that if so-and-so might be

true or possible, then such-and-such could be the predictable result. This syllogism is so elemental that it has the charm and beauty of being a revealed truth all on its own.

In many regards, Baron-Cohen is the public face of autism research. He is the Director of the Cambridge Autism Research Center and has published hundreds of scholarly articles and multiple books on autism. In *The Pattern Seekers*, he “present(s) a new theory of human invention . . . Humans alone have a specific kind of engine in the brain. It’s one that seeks out if-and-then patterns, the minimum definition of a system.” Baron-Cohen calls this the “Systemizing Mechanism,” claiming that it “allowed humans to become the technological masters of our planet, eclipsing all other species” (p. xvi)

Steven Pinker characterized Baron-Cohen’s latest contribution as “shed[ding] light on one of humanity’s most distinctive traits, celebrates human cognitive diversity, and is rich with empathy and psychological insight.” The most startling insight may be Baron-Cohen’s notion that the genes for this systemizing mechanism, the if-and-then impulse, overlap with the genes for autism. This observation is perhaps what prompted another astute observer of the autistic perspective, *Neurotribes*’ Steve Silberman, to claim that Baron-Cohen has shown how autism “has accelerated the advancement of human civilization and culture in ways we can barely imagine.” This last accolade is in keeping with Temple Grandin’s audacious claim that without autistics, we would still be living in caves.

Invention is typically defined as the creation of a new idea or thing which subsequently contributes to our society at large. Invention is also, perhaps presumptuously, considered a distinctly human trait. This notion is flawed on many fronts, not the least of which is the obvious talent that some birds and mammals have to imagine, to reason, to fabricate, and to use tools for any number of practical purposes. Crows, ravens, chimps and a host of other creatures manage these cognitive feats all the time, but they do it quietly, without proudly awarding themselves Nobel Prizes. For their part, humans seem biased toward inventions that can be used to improve life. Baron-Cohen, however, makes us appreciate the creative secrets often locked inside certain rarefied neurological states, conditions which often involve a residual cost or a sacrifice in other social behaviors. I hesitate to describe this condition with words such as “autism” and “spectrum” after my encounter

with a remarkable book by Edith Sheffer on the previously unknown personal beliefs of Doctor Hans (*Asperger's Children: The Origins of Autism in Nazi Austria*), the subject of my review in a previous edition of this journal.

Baron-Cohen posits that somewhere along the human timeline, for utterly unknown reasons, early *Homo sapiens* gradually gained the ability to discern the patterns that are inherently embedded in nature and daily life. "When the Systemizing Mechanism evolved in the human brain 70,000 years ago," Baron-Cohen explains, "Instead of looking at an object, or an event or any information, as if there was nothing more that could be done with it, our minds started to look at it as system, something governed by if-and-then patterns, the result of a cognitive revolution in the brain that led *Homo sapiens* to diverge from all other animals and conquer the earth. And it all came down to the drive to seek out patterns" (xvii).

Thankfully, Baron-Cohen never speculates if it was a good thing that humans "conquered" the earth, or whether other animals are of lesser value than us, leaving that for the reader to ponder. But he does stipulate that the select humans who were uniquely endowed with enhanced systemizing often found themselves at odds with their communities, who perceived them as socially disabled. Drawing on his own considerable research, he also shows why people with superior pattern reading skills are *still* diverging dramatically in their ability to socialize or empathize.

Baron-Cohen's findings are slightly less sanguine than Silberman's well-intentioned conclusions about neurodiversity, which is, of course, something we obviously need to be live an inclusive life together. Baron-Cohen is more focused on neurodivergence, something that at first might appear as threateningly anti-social, but which ultimately results in the light bulb, the theory of relativity, governing dynamics, the radio, or the personal computer. *The Pattern Seekers* is a grand overview of our epic unfolding as a mutual civilization with multiple variants. On this note, I prefer the British edition of the book, which is titled *The Pattern Seekers: A New Theory of Human Invention* and whose cover shows a paper clip graphic bending into the shape of an airplane. The American version, subtitled *How Autism Drives Human Invention, a 70,000 Year History*, features a clever color spectrum of sharpened pencils on its cover, emphasizing the drama of autism driving us forward with sharp tools. The British edition cover, in contrast, does not

reference autism, but shows something being bent—apparently out of shape, but actually into a brand new paradigm.

I prefer this concept of neurodivergence to neurodiversity. To diverge is not a passive term, it's active, whereas diversity, as important as it is, denotes an already existing paradigm which we somehow need to accept, rather than a novel set of pattern discoveries arrived at through the strangeness of individual minds. The inventor Nikola Tesla, for example, was astronomically gifted. He literally invented the future we now occupy, but he was easily duped out of his inheritance by craftier and more “normal” rivals who co-opted his ideas. Tesla was a true pattern finder rather than a mere pattern seeker, a divergent genius who simply reflects reality or actuality back to us, rather than some benevolent neurodiversity icon who shares his hard-won battles with the rest of us weary foot soldiers. I'm also delighted to celebrate Baron-Cohen's more dynamic notion of neurodivergence as a driver of human invention.

The psychologist Nancy Doyle recently paid tribute to another neurodivergent innovator: the American inaugural poet Amanda Gorman. Doyle's *Forbes* article, titled “Neurodivergence and the Spirit of Progress: the Hill We Climb,” celebrates Gorman's neurodivergence: “With Gorman's neurodivergent and disabling (auditory processing disorder, hypersensitivity to sound, and speech stuttering, which are shared by many with autism, ADHD, dyspraxia, dyslexia and more) we have yet another example of disorder turning into difference turning into dynamism.” Doyle asks us to recognize how many “neurominorities” tread this unique path, going on to become trailblazers, entrepreneurs and innovators in their fields. They do so by learning early that growing up “disordered” or different can often teach lessons about which neurotypicals have simply no clue whatsoever, since as Dr. Grandin has also pointed out, they expend so much of their energy trying to ensure that everyone around them thinks they're “normal” and therefore admissible into the country club of society.

Rather than make the obvious claim that all people should be treated equally, *The Pattern Seekers* instead explores the outer limits of creativity, examining what the concrete contributions made by neurodivergents through their distinctly different thought patterns and recurring asocial behaviors. Baron-Cohen explores the creative trouble-making gene in highly cogent chapters

focusing on the born (untrained) pattern seeker, the core systematizer, the five types of brains, the mind of an inventor, the revolutionary cognition mode, and the possibilities of nurturing the inventors of the future.

*The Pattern Seekers* compares to other popular books on oddball–autistic and otherwise—by Oliver Sacks, Steve Silberman, and especially Temple Grandin, whose own research can be attributed to her own unique lateral thinking, visual acuity, and keen pattern recognition. These patterns exist in all physical and psychological phenomena, echoing through poetry, visual arts, equations, architecture, music, dance, theatre, and politics. Patterns stare us in the face, but often we are too linear-minded to notice or to feel them. The pattern seekers explored by Baron-Cohen however, cannot fail to notice the proportional harmony inherent in the design of all things, organic and technological, since they live in much closer proximity to them.

Of course, Baron-Cohen is not without his critics. Some in the autistic community reject his Theory of Mind model for creating the popular misconception that autistics lack empathy. If autistic people lack the ability to see and feel from the perspectives of others, it seems unlikely that they could be responsible for huge leaps forward, culturally and socially, that Baron-Cohen credits them with in *The Pattern Seekers*. Baron-Cohen addresses this by suggesting that the Systemizing Mechanism is in conflict with the “Empathy Circuit,” and that your brain type ultimately “depends on the tuning of the Empathy Circuit and the Systemization Mechanism, which in turn determines where you are on the empathy and systemization bell curve.” Here, some might also take issue with Baron-Cohen’s use of “bell curve,” a bothersome throwback to the kind of value-laden gradation thinking that Hans Asperger utilized in his determinative judgments about sociability and community participation. This system in turn allowed him to judge some individuals, especially children, as being not worth the trouble of care.

Still, *The Pattern Seekers* asks undeniably important questions: why do so many major breakthroughs occur largely to those who possess systematically and radically different frames of mind and reference? What can the cognitive uniqueness they all appear to use to navigate the world tell us about the furthest reaches of consciousness exploration and research? In other words, what can we learn from the truly gifted aliens amongst us? We all

search for alternative ways to describe those gifted individuals, many of whom never even made it into the footnotes of formal history. Baron-Cohen also helps to provide new ways of designating and describing difference. I personally propose calling them exactly what they really are: Exceptionals. This is because, as Alan Turing put it in the film *The Imitation Game* (and as Baron-Cohen used for the dedication epigram to this fine book): “Sometimes it is the people no one can imagine anything of who do things no one can imagine.”

*Editor’s Note: A version of this article first appeared at Critics at Large on February 10, 2021.*

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