

Madness and Genetic Determinism

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Is Mental Illness in Our Genes?

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PREFACE

On the morning of Saturday 28 March 2016, Karina Morales-Rodriguez and Marta Martinez were shot dead outside the MoneyTree retail financial services provider at the corner of South First and East Walnut Streets of Yakima, Washington, where they both worked.¹ Later that day agents of the Pacific Northwest Violent Offender Task Force arrested Manuel Enrique Verduzco without incident at the home of his parents. He was charged with aggravated first-degree murder and pleaded not guilty. On 19 December 2017, the *Yakima Herald* reported that Verduzco's lawyers requested that experts be allowed to testify that their client inherited a tendency toward schizophrenia from his father's side of the family.²

Are people suffering from schizophrenia or any other mental illness really “born that way”? What does it even mean to say that mental illness is caused by genes? These are the questions we will be considering here.

How we view these conditions—as problems with living, or as brain disorders, probably inherited—determines how society deals with persons suffering from them. For the single year 2013, total spending on mental health interventions in the United States exceeded \$200 billion.³ There are literally trillions of dollars at stake here.

The way we view these conditions also touches on some of the most profound questions, such as what kind of society we would like to live in, and what it means to be a human being.

As I researched this book, I came to realize that there actually were two separate stories that needed telling. One was the story of biological psychiatry, with its emphasis on bio-genetic explanations for mental illness and somatic remedies, and the other was the story of humanistic psychiatry,

with its emphasis on personal and social causes and remedies. During the past forty or so years humanistic approaches to mental illness have been almost completely eclipsed by bio-genetic ones, but the humanistic approach has never gone away.

I have not attempted to write a comprehensive account of these parallel stories—that would be an effort requiring many volumes—but I have attempted to tell each of these stories as a more-or-less continuous account, summarizing the work of the main players. At all times I have striven to highlight the human cost of scientific and medical hubris.

One hundred years have elapsed since the establishment of the German Institute for Psychiatric Research, with Ernst Rüdin as the Director of Psychiatric and Genealogical Studies. The work of Rüdin and his colleagues served as part of the intellectual justification for the T4 Program for the elimination of “life unworthy of life,” which in turn served as the springboard for the Holocaust.

Of course, nobody is talking about breeding a “master race” anymore. But as the field of psychiatric genetics enters its second century, with headlines proclaiming on a regular basis that scientists have found the genetic basis of mental illness, it is time to take stock of what we have learned. This is a story of compassionate healers and self-promoting hucksters, of Nazis and monks, of brilliant science and naked corporate greed. It’s a story that is now more relevant than ever.

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NOTES

1. Meyers, Donald W, “Witness: Man Accused in Two Yakima Killings Was at Store Day Before,” *Yakima Herald*, March 28, 2016, https://www.yakimaherald.com/news/crime_and_courts/witness-man-accused-in-two-yakima-killings-was-at-store/article_f3a525b8-f579-11e5-9a00-dfb710d1ccba.html
2. Meyers, Donald W. “Judge Will Rule Whether Suspect in MoneyTree Double Murder Can Use Genetic Evidence of Mental Illness.” *Yakima Herald*, December 19, 2017, https://www.yakimaherald.com/news/crime_and_courts/judge-will-rule-whether-suspect-in-moneytree-double-murder-can/article_77c21c8e-e54c-11e7-8759-8f470977c163.html
3. Roehrig, Charles, “Mental Disorders Top the List of the Most Costly Conditions in the United States: \$201 Billion,” *Health Affairs*, 35, no. 6 (June 2016): 1130.

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