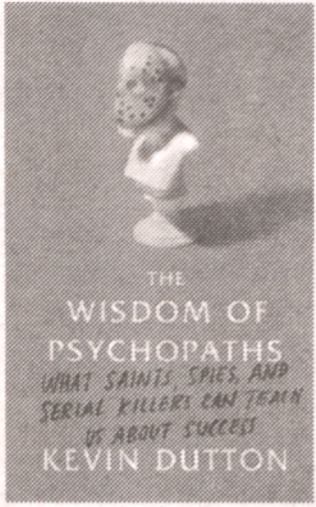


Connecting the dots between super smart and super scary

BY THOMAS VINCENT
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The Wisdom of Psychopaths: What Saints, Spies, and Serial Killers Can Teach Us about Success by Kevin Dutton

In modern English vernacular perhaps no term is more overused and yet less understood than the word “psychopath.” Crack open any murder mystery and images immediately spring to mind of serial killers with cellars full of body parts. Horror movies delight in portraying psychopaths as cold-blooded, emotionless automatons, able to carve you up and sup on your spleen without batting an eye.

But is this extreme description really accurate? Does one have to have a fondness for human sweetmeats and Chianti to be classified as a psychopath? To Dr. Kevin Dutton, author of “The Wisdom of Psychopaths,” the answer is a resounding “no.” “Just as there’s no official dividing line between someone who plays recreational golf on the weekends and, say, Tiger Woods, so the boundary between a world-class, ‘hole-in-one’ superpsychopath and one who merely ‘psychopathizes’ is similarly blurred.”

In Dutton’s view, far from being a question of absolutes — “you’re either a psychopath or you’re not” — there exists instead “a spectrum of psychopathy along which each of us has our place.” Perhaps the best analogy Dutton comes up with is that of an audio mixing board: “Think of psychopathic traits as the dials and sliders on a studio mixing desk. If you push all of them to the max, you’ll have a sound track that’s no good to anyone. But if the sound track is graded and some controls are turned up higher than others — such as fearlessness, focus, lack of empathy and mental toughness, for example — you may have a surgeon who’s a cut above the rest.”

Dutton is no slouch when it comes to the field of psychology. A fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine and the Society for the Scientific Study of Psychopathy, Dutton’s bona fides also include work as a research psychologist at Magdalen College, University of Oxford. In addition, his writing has appeared in *New Scientist*, *The Guardian*, and *Psychology Today*. In “The Wisdom of Psychopaths,” the author combines his own considerable research

with that of scores of his contemporaries to examine the question raised in the book’s rather over-the-top subtitle: “What Saints, Spies and Serial Killers Can Teach Us About Success.”

From the outset, Dutton presents a compelling case. Once you accept the notion that not all psychopaths are cold-blooded killers, the rest of his arguments seem totally logical: “Sure, behind closed doors I’ve encountered my fair share of Hannibal Lecters and Ted Bundys: Remorseless, unconscionable A-listers who could dine at any psychopath table you care to mention without even picking up the phone — just by showing up. But I’ve also met psychopaths who, far from devouring society from within, serve, through hard-as-nails decision making, to protect and enrich it instead: surgeons, soldiers, spies, entrepreneurs — dare I say, even lawyers.”

So what are the traits that Dutton finds so fascinating? The best example the author comes up with is from a book entitled “The Mask of Sanity,” written in 1941 by American physician Hervey Cleckley: “The psychopath he (Cleckley) observes, is an intelligent person, characterized by a poverty of emotions, the absence of shame, egocentricity, superficial charm, lack of guilt, lack of anxiety, immunity to punishment, unpredictability, irresponsibility, manipulativeness, and a transient interpersonal lifestyle.”

While this collection of attributes may not seem like it describes someone who is worthy of emulation, it is important to recognize that Dutton is not arguing that all of these traits are good for all people, or that the personality sliders should be cranked up to 11 all the time. What he means is that in some fields of endeavor, specifically ones that require a cool steady hand and the ability to focus without interference from emotion and anxiety, those whose personalities sit on the psychopathic end of the teeter-totter tend to out-perform the rest of us. To put it another way, if you’re looking to select a commando team to take out Osama Bin Laden, personality traits like anxiety, guilt and self-doubt will probably not top your list.

Perhaps the most intriguing chapter in the book is the comparison between psychopaths and Buddhist monks. Both populations exhibit a remarkable ability to eliminate all thoughts of the past and the future and to live totally in the moment. And while the uses to which they put their abilities are diametrically opposed, Dutton nevertheless observes that “anchoring your thoughts unswervingly in the present, focusing exclusively in the here and now, is a cognitive discipline that psychopathy and spiritual enlightenment have in common.”

Dutton is an able scientist and debater. But it is his writing ability that truly sets this book apart. Where a lesser author could have beaten the reader senseless with scientific data and obscure case studies, the author seems to know intuitively when to switch from pure science to narrative. Dutton’s prose exhibits a playfulness that is quite entertaining and his fascination for his subject is... well, infectious. Dutton’s chief observation is that it is not one’s character traits that cause problems for most psychopaths. Instead, it’s the inability to “dial back” those traits which seem to always be maxed out. “As Jamie (a psychopath Dutton interviewed) had articulated when I first arrived in Broadmoor, the problem with psychopaths isn’t that they’re chock-full of evil. Ironically it’s precisely the opposite: They have too much of a good thing.”

As Dutton sympathetically concludes, when it comes to psychopaths, “The car is to die for. It’s just too fast for the road.”

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