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Is Your Learning Style Paranoid?

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Is Your Learning Style Paranoid? What's New Is You

In a supermarket the other day I noticed an attractive young woman and then, with a shock, her right hand. With a mix of fascination and anxiety I saw that the hand was a stump with a thumb and, where her pinkie should have been, a middle finger opposing her thumb like a pincer.

Intellectually I wasn't startled at all: birth defects happen all the time. Every pregnancy is a fabulous storm of genetic information shaping the growing fetus. Not surprisingly, messages occasionally get misdelivered, mutated, or scrambled. Such variability makes evolution possible. In every family of puppies or kiddies, the individuals have a different mix of traits. You may recall the famous Russian ethologist who mated the tamest individuals from different litters of Siberian foxes and eventually produced two different animals: the usual ferocious fox and new foxes tame as a lapdog, with juvenile (neotenic) physical and behavioral traits.

Some genetic variations turn out to be adaptive, some crippling or even fatal: some more or less irrelevant. What surprised me in the supermarket was the fascination and twinge of anxiety I felt at the sight of the young woman's peculiar hand. Unless she wanted to be a pianist, the mutation presented no serious obstacle to an effective life. Yet its strangeness had an uncanny quality, and I could see why the woman casually kept the hand covered around strangers.

What's going on here?

We're psychosomatic([link is external](#)) creatures. We generate our conception of reality by combining feedback from our bodies, parents, and cultures. In learning particular rules and facts (*The stove is hot, don't touch it*) we're also developing categories that enable us to judge new things by relating them to what's already familiar (hot, cold; pleasure, pain, etc). In the wisdom of slang we learn by "absorbing" or rejecting new anomalies that don't fit what we already know. The more you can absorb, the wider we say your knowledge of the world—your experience—is.

Meanwhile back in the supermarket, there I am puzzled by the fascination and anxiety the unusual hand stirred in me. Fascination is an emergency response to something unexpectedly new. Confronted by a potentially good or dangerous anomaly, fascination focuses and concentrates your attention.

Attractive people promise more life. Movie "stars" or pumped up body "builders" invite hero-worship—transference. They look more or less like other humans, but their exceptional features have the quality of fetishes. Like

money, religious symbols, or the flag, their beauty or strength has power we identify with.

At root, the power we imagine in positive anomalies seems to offer more life, and more life means less insecurity, less danger, less death. Attractive young people signal fertility, a long life ahead of them. Idealizing them, we can attribute all sorts of talents and virtues to them. In a supermarket this is especially pronounced. The store is a temple of symbolic immortality. You gaze at blood-red animal cuts, fun sweets, and lively packaging. Everything is “king size” or “super.” Mr Clean will wash away dirt, disease, and death. In panting color the magazine rack presents “out of this world” hair styles and invincible new cars. In the freezers food is imperishable, and in the pharmacy life can be rescued from decay.

In such a fantasy world a birth defect is jarring. Since we’re highstrung, vulnerable animals, with radars always scanning the horizon for threats, we’re apt to feel—*hello*—anxiety.

Anomalies show that the world is bigger and stranger than “our” reality. Even anomalies that promise more life rattle us, but in that case we interpret our response as positive “wonder” or as the kids say, “awesome.” By contrast, anomalies that threaten to limit or impair life remind us that our bodies are fragile and impermanent. They arouse associations with injury, futility, and death. And such a response is especially disturbing because often it’s a gut response, not a conscious judgment that allows us to feel smart and masterful.

As Michael [Polanyi](#) (link is external) reminds us, never mind Freud, most of the time we don’t know why we react as we do. A strange face may strike you as appealing or repellent. You recognize the new visage as a [gestalt](#) (link is external) you don’t analyze lips, chin, eyes, and other features to assemble your concept. Like the uncanny answer to a riddle, the face clicks into awareness, often making a positive or negative impression. You’ve unwittingly processed the information before you come up with a conscious account of the face. You know more than you can say.

But that’s not all. The gut reaction to an anomaly is usually characterized by moral aggression. You “fight” a “bad cold”; genetic variations are birth “defects” or “abnormalities.” The fear is that otherwise the anomaly will contaminate or infect you. In the wisdom of slang, what’s surprising threatens to “freak you out.” Much of the time an anomaly may be harmless or even beneficial, but as in paranoia, we feel it has a menacing quality. If you misjudge an anomaly, you may be using it as a scapegoat, blaming it for faults that really lie elsewhere. It is easy to scapegoat immigrants and other races, for example, exaggerating superficial differences. Gut-level self-defense can turn them into abnormalities. Your hostility may be scarcely conscious yet it pumps up the nervous system’s emergency chemistry as well as righteous self-esteem.

It's useful to see that the negative, even evil associations we attribute to some anomalies are delusions. They're grounded in our nervous systems and the false categories culture has taught us. Our reactions are prejudiced, based not evidence but on limitations in the way we're built. In a classic experiment monkeys panicked when shown the severed head of a monkey. The severed noggin was actually harmless, but the monkey subjects weren't assessing the evidence, their shock was instinctual. They reacted as you and I react when terrorists behead a human captive.

Civilization means living arrangements that allow strangers to live together. And the awkward truth is that other people are always anomalies. Civilized imaginations have to keep getting used to anomalies. One way is to think of them as variations or exceptions rather than defects. Ultimately tolerance comes from recognizing that though we often cling to cherished categories like a child's safety blanket, reality is variations in motion, not a polished rock.

Prejudice isn't just about racism or hating broccoli. It's what happens when your gut reaction to the strangeness of being alive starts to panic. Think of the common cold that stuffs your head with moldy dishrags and spills sand into your windpipe and lungs. What causes that misery isn't the cold virus—the anomaly—but your immune system's overreaction.

Luckily we're singularly adaptable animals. We can play, experiment, and teach each other what's good for you and what gives you poison ivy. We can share our curiosity and discoveries—which you and i are doing right now. Yes, some anomalies are really hard to get used to, such as the kind of rogue asteroid that made the dinosaurs late for breakfast. Closer to home are the surprises that you meet in your local immortality emporium, between Mr Clean and the can opener with the lifetime guarantee: a surprise that helps you wonder who we are.

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Resources used in this essay:

Michael Polanyi: *The Tacit Dimension*
Ernest Becker: *Escape from Evil*