

SIMON BARON-COHEN

Psychologist, Autism Research Centre, Cambridge University; author of *Autism and Asperger Syndrome*

We Are Not All the Same

When I was young, I believed in equality as a guiding principle in life. It's not such a bad idea, when you think about it. If we treat everyone else as our equals, no one feels inferior—and as an added bonus, no one feels superior. Whereas it's a wonderfully cozy, warm, feel-good idea, I have changed my mind about equality. There seemed to be two moments in my thinking about this principle that revealed some cracks in the perfect idea.

The first moment was in thinking about economic equality. Living on a kibbutz was an interesting opportunity to see that, if you aim for everyone to have exactly the same amount of money or exactly the same possessions or exactly the same luxuries, the only way to achieve this is by legislation. In a small community like a kibbutz, or in an Amish community, where all members of the community can decide on their lifestyles collectively and where the legislation is the result of consensual discussion, economic equality might just be possible.

But in the large towns and cities in which most of us live—and with the opportunities to see how other people live through travel, television, and the Web—it is untenable to expect complete strangers to accept economic equality if it is forced on them. So, for small groups of people who know each other and choose to live together, economic equality might be an achievable principle. but for large groups of strangers, I think we have to admit that it's an unrealistic principle. Economic equality presumes pre-existing relationships based on trust, mutual respect, and choice, which are hard to achieve when you hardly know your neighbors and feel alienated from how your community is run.

The second moment was in thinking about how to square equality with individual differences. Equality is easy to believe in if you believe everyone is basically the same. The problem is that it is patently obvious that we are not all the same. Once you accept the existence of individual differences, this opens the door to some varieties of difference being better than others.

Let's take the thorny subject of gender differences. If males have more testosterone than females, and if testosterone causes not only your beard but also your muscles to grow stronger, it is just naïve to cling to the idea that women and men are on a level playing field in competitive sports where strength matters. This is just one example of how individual differences in hormonal levels can play havoc with the idea of biological equality.

Our new research suggests that prenatal testosterone also affects how the mind develops. Higher levels of prenatal testosterone are associated with slower social and language development and reduced empathy. Higher levels of prenatal testosterone are also associated with more autistic traits, stronger interests in systems, and greater attention to detail. A few more drops of this molecule seem to be associated with important differences in how our minds work.

So biology has little time for equality. This conclusion should come as no surprise, since Darwin's theory of evolution was premised on the existence of individual differences upon which natural selection operates. In modern Darwinism, such individual differences are the result of genetic differences—either mutations or polymorphisms in the DNA sequence. Given how hormones and genes (which are not mutually exclusive, genetic differences being one way in which differences in hormone levels come about) can put us onto very different paths in development, how can we believe in equality in all respects?

The other way in which biology is unequal is in the likelihood of developing different medical conditions. Males are sometimes referred to as the weaker sex, because they are more likely to develop a whole host of conditions, among which are autism (four boys for every one girl) or Asperger syndrome (nine boys for every one girl). Given these risks, it becomes almost comical to believe in equality.

I still believe in some aspects of the idea of equality, but I can no longer accept the whole package. The question is, Is it worth holding on to some elements of the idea if you've given up other elements? Does it make sense to have a partial belief in equality? Do you have to either believe in all of it or none of it? My mind has been changed from my youthful starting point, when I hoped that equality could be followed in all areas of life, but I still see value in holding on to some aspects of the principle. Striving to give

people equality of social opportunity is still a value system worth defending, even if, in the realm of biology, we have to conclude that equality has no place.