

A catastrophe of caring?

The seeming indifference and economic self-interest that accompanies legislative moves (often by fiscal conservatives) to roll back the social safety net is typically met with calls for greater compassion, empathy, and consideration of others by social welfare advocates, who ask how a just society could do anything less than everything it can for its citizens.

The contours of this familiar debate are contentious, to say the least, but what if it became possible to genetically engineer empathy—and eradicate evil? This was the argument of Mark Walker in his proposal for a Genetic Virtue Program that appeared in the September 2009 issue of the journal. In such a world, the discussion might shift to one of quickly embracing policies that maximize caring.

Not so fast, cautions Shea Robison in the lead article to this issue, an essay-length response to Walker's proposal. If, in a slightly more engineered world, trait-based empathy could become omnipresent through genetic manipulation, the upshot might not be a just society but a weak one, Robison maintains, suffering from the overextensions of a debilitating "catastrophe of caring."

While social policies motivated by an abundance of caring might seem like a good idea in the near term, in the long run such an unbridled concern for others could eventually lead to the adoption of maladaptive collective policies with the potential to weaken society. Thus, rather than strengthening the social fabric, too much caring could result in society's undoing. Robison challenges the reader to imagine such a future.

A different tact is taken by the other research articles in this issue, looking at the consequences of perceived strength and abuse of power. Gregg Murray's investigation into preferences for physical formidability in leaders finds that the threat of war can lead to preferences for leaders with more powerful physical attributes as well as perceived qualities of being physically imposing.

Laura Betzig looks at the consequences of debauched or depraved leadership—quite the opposite of

excessive empathy—with a fascinating historical account of genital attacks on Roman emperors and other primates where punishment (presumably, for sexual predation and abuse of power) was meted out with death blows between the legs and elsewhere.

From Julius Caesar and Caligula during the early Roman Empire to Commodus and Valerian's time in the second and third centuries AD, emperors defiled marriage beds, despoiled virgins, and they paid the price. "Most Roman emperors competed for sexual access to their subjects," Betzig writes, "and probably at least partly as a result. . . risked having their genitals attacked."

And so, she concludes, many met a bad end.

A pair of perspective pieces round out this issue, including a summary by Sophal Ear of his research on emerging infectious disease control in Cambodia, Indonesia, and Mexico. Sophal's contribution is based on his plenary address to the 2013 annual meeting of the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences held on the campus of Texas Tech University. In addition, Alisa Von Hagel reviews the regulatory landscape concerning women's health and oocyte donation, examining state-level practices and claims regarding a decentralized regulatory approach.

With this issue the association is pleased to announce the election of Eileen Burgin of the University of Vermont and Brian Spisak of VU University Amsterdam to new terms on the Executive Council. We also thank Rebecca Hannagan, Rebecca Harris, Samuel Hines, John Orbell, and John Strate for their past service on the council.

In the fall we look forward to holding the annual APLS meeting at Emory University in Atlanta. More information about the meeting can be found on the association's webpage (aplsnet.org). To receive updates and announcements, contact Executive Director Gregg Murray at g.murray@ttu.edu or simply "like" the APLS Facebook page (facebook.com/AssnPoliticsLifeSciences).

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