Three Seductive Ideas by Jerome Kagan

Do the first two years of life really determine a child's future? Are human beings, like other primates, only motivated by pleasure? Do people actually possess stable traits like intelligence, fear, etc.? Harvard psychologist Jerome Kagan challenges some of our most cherished notions about human nature.

My Personal Review:
After a hundred years of trying to understand human behavior in scientific terms through very different fields, we are left with a confusing array of largely unconnected theories. Science is about finding unifying principles among diverse but compatible ideas, but our temptation is to settle too quickly for the next simple theory that comes along and sounds plausible and compelling. Kagan starts with the perspective that physical sciences have been around for three hundred years, but psychological science as such for only a century, placing psychological science at the historical place where physical sciences were in the 17th century. While the analogy is questionable, the point that psychological science is, for all its vitality and productivity, truly in its infancy, is made powerfully between the lines throughout this book. Kagan informs this situation elegantly by not only pointing out our need for telling simplifying stories but also showing how some of the grandest simplifying stories, which theorists often take for granted: (1) the notion of essential individual traits, (2) the early influences on the formation of the mind, and (3) the assumed root of motivation in pleasure seeking, underlie roadblocks in our understanding of ourselves. The book points out that we apply ideas like intelligence, fear, and consciousness to a wide variety of different agents, situations, and classes of evidence, prematurely assuming that we have found essential qualities in these things. That many of these abstractions are not so broadly applicable in the same way is demonstrated by a select set of experimental and clinical observations that make the point clearly.
While "Three Seductive Ideas" is oddly disappointing for not providing its own grand simplifying theory for human behavior, it does make specific
suggestions for addressing the current assumptions he believes are mistaken. In response to our passion for abstraction and premature creation of psychological essences built on a house of sand, Kagan emphasizes more rigorously specifying the agent, context, and class of evidence when we talk about these qualities. The experience of fleeing from a predator is not the same thing as the experience of worrying about a mortgage payment, even though the same drug might mitigate some of the "fear" in both cases. The situation and the history are in fact important in understanding what is going on. In response to our tendency to emphasize the role of very early experience, Kagan emphasizes how we are more influenced by what is discrepant than what we expect. This limits the degree to which the adult mind can be meaningfully influenced by very early experience. In response to the widespread assumption that we are motivated to seek pleasure, a quality believed held in common with animals, Kagan illustrates how human beings are also motivated by a broad range of socially relevant and more uniquely human feelings, such as guilt, shame, and pride. We not only anticipate pleasure, but even more, we are motivated to avoid risk and thus act in ways that are socially rewarding and bring feelings of virtue. In a meaningful way, human beings are not just hedonistic but also moral animals. No easy answers here, but a shift in emphasis that may inspire better psychological science and open up currently blocked paths to understanding human beings more deeply.

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