

5. Fussy Men, Perfectionists and Controllers

What the detective story is about is not murder but the restoration of order.¹

What happens to children like Colin when they grow up? He might turn out like any one of his forebears, the benighted ones, perhaps; more likely, though, like his mother or his father, both of whom rose above their genome unscathed. Or, rather, scathed with just a few OC traits.

Predictions are always hard, especially when they're about the future. One asks herself, *What will that fellow be like, the one I met on the Internet and his name is Sinbad and he lives in Sinsinatti?* Is he one of those controlling men, like my ex-husband? Or is he just be one of those fussy men? Maybe he is an eccentric genius like the Banana-man, another certified OC who applied his traits to the enduring benefit of mankind.

THE BANANA-MAN

Who was the banana-man? He was a fellow named Ken Bannister who spent more than thirty years and \$150,000 assembling "the world's largest collection devoted to any one fruit" at the International Banana Club and Museum in Hesperia, Calif., in the High Desert northeast of Los Angeles. His preoccupation with bananas began innocently enough; someone gave him a roll of Chiquita banana stickers when he was at a convention and he had a hilarious good time distributing the stickers to the conventioners. A different kind of psychiatrist might suggest that perhaps he had been traumatized by a banana when he was a boy, perhaps in a cave, but I prefer to take the banana-man at his word. Besides, whenever I eat a banana, I like to take the sticker and recycle it by sticking to one of our daughters' arm or shirt. You can imagine the hilarious good times we have around our home, but you can't say that I am preoccupied with bananas. I do the same with the stickers that come on apples, pears and other fruit.

The banana-man, though, certainly was preoccupied with bananas, if not obsessed, and before he was done he had collected no fewer than 17,000 banana-related items. This, it seemed, was his limit and now he says that he is "done with bananas." His obsession just ran its course, although his decision may have been influenced by the Hesperia Recreation and Park District, who evicted him and his bananas from the space it had lent him because it wanted to rotate the exhibits. One only wonders what exhibits they had to equal the impact and potential social benefit of 17,000 banana-themed items.

The Banana-man captures a happy corner of the OC space. His OC trait leavened by his positive energy, good humor and love for mankind. One could call his preoccupations an obsession, in a careless kind of way, just as one might say he is depressed because he feels a bit down in the dumps or that her father is crazy because he loves to play tricks with the stickers he peels off fruit. Bannister's fascination may or may not have been an obsession. It is better to think of it as an eccentric hobby, harmless if expensive and time-consuming.

¹ P D James.

In his prime, Bannister called himself "Bananaster," which was probably redundant, according to research done by psychologists in Buffalo, New York, Brett Pelham, Matthew Mirenberg and John Jones. They observed that the first few letters of one's name are statistically related to one's occupation and where one lives, and presumably also to one's preoccupation, as in **Bannister** and **Bananas**. Women named **Mildred**, for example, are more likely to live in **Milwaukee** and men named **Phil** in Philadelphia. People named **Denise**, **Dena**, **Denice**, **Denna**, **Dennis**, **Denis**, **Denny** or **Denver** are more likely to be **dentists** and names like **Laura**, **Lauren**, **Laurie**, **Laverne**, **Lawrence**, **Larry**, **Lance**, and **Laurence** predispose their bearers to the practice of **law**. This the psychologists attributed to their own theory of "implicit egotism" but they acknowledge it may just be "priming." Priming refers to subliminal suggestion. For example, college students who had been primed to think about old people walk more slowly than usual when they left the psychology lab. (Pelham, Mirenberg, & Jones, 2002) As it happens, OCs remarkably susceptible to suggestion. Thus, OC men named **Newbold** are likelier to live in **New York** or **New Jersey**. If your boyfriend's name is **Newbold** and he lives in **Newark**, **New Jersey** or **Newburgh**, **New York**, chances are he's a fussy guy.

Suggestion: the clever hypnotist suggests that his subject will bark like a dog when he mentions the word dog-biscuit. The audience is reduced to a state of helpless mirth when the fellow barks although it must be an old joke by now. Hypnosis is an interesting example of how easy it is for one's mind to lose its power of agency. It is so easily derailed; that is what suggestion does. OC does it, too.

OC individuals are remarkably vulnerable to suggestion. One fellow I knew had a habit that was not only expensive but it got him into trouble. He had a compulsion to travel. Not the compulsion that old people are prone to after they've retired and believe that they've missed out on a lot in life. They make up for it by taking a river cruise on the Danube river where they meet a lot of other old people who feel they have been similarly deprived. My patient was a young man, but he didn't deprive himself. The mere suggestion of a foreign place like a picture in a magazine or a story on TV aroused an obsession with the place and a compulsion to visit. What placed him beyond the pale, though, was his idea of a visit. He would have been better off taking a river cruise with old people. My patient would fly somewhere, say, Marrakech, on Friday night, spend a night at the airport hotel and then fly back in time to go to work on Monday. If the connections were inconvenient, he might have to take a comp day. It cost him a bundle though he probably accumulated a lot of frequent-flier miles. The problem was his name. It was Mohammed Al-Aziz, and before long Homeland Security took notice of his peregrinations, for which he could give no satisfactory explanation.

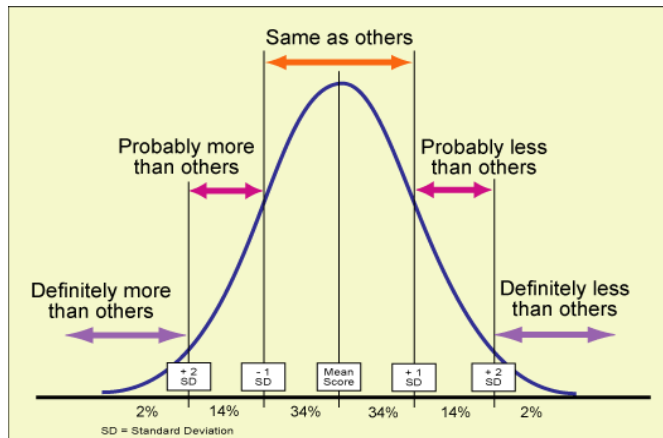
OC traits are ubiquitous. Most are harmless weaknesses, though we don't tend to tell our friends about them. They find out, though. *OMG, Charlene, do you know that you space the hangers in your closet perfectly?* Yes, Charlene does know, and it doesn't take her much time, either, because she has a system for spacing the hangers. They are spaced at the precise interval of two finger-breadths. She learned to do it when she worked at the Gap. But she is mildly annoyed that you noticed.

OC traits are amusing, unless they occur in a compulsive drug-user or a temperamental child or if you find it annoying that your husband devotes all his spare time and cash to accumulating banana-related gewgaws. They also speak to the physiology that underlies some kinds of human behavior.

OC traits are also dimensional. One may have a lot of OC traits, or very strong ones, just as one might have a lot of OC genes. The traits and their genes are distributed in the entire population in ways that natural selection has deemed fit. They can even be described on a curve.

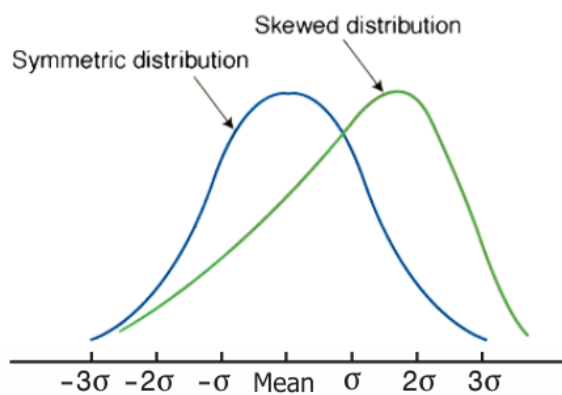
FUSSY MEN

People differ in how and to what degree their OC traits are manifest. It is a function of **individual differences**, a matter that psychologists have studied at length. Personality traits as well as cognitive traits like IQ



occur not in categories but on a continuum, distributed in the population along a bell-shaped curve. On this metric, deviance can be defined with mathematical precision, in terms of *standard deviations* (σ) from normal. With respect to IQ, the normal curve meant that despicable nouns like *cretin*, *moron*, *imbecile* and *idiot* could be discarded, and intelligence could be described as a number, unlikely ever to be misused as a pejorative. *Genius*, too, need not refer to one's singular contributions to the advancement of science or culture, but rather, to anyone with an IQ score higher than 145.

The bell curve, the normal or Gaussian distribution of elements in a population, is the mathematical underpinning of the "spectrum" or "continuum" model of traits and also certain disorders, especially common ones like hypertension, obesity and anxiety. It shows that anxiety is a virtually universal experience but the amount of anxiety one is prone to differs among individuals. If someone were far to the left on the Gaussian curve, it would take a lot to make him or her worry; someone far to the right would worry all the time about the least little things. Most of us (67%, to be precise) are normal worriers. We worry about our daughter on her first date or the dog who seems to be scratching too much, the clanking sound the car makes when we change gears or when the plane is ever going to leave LaGuardia. Absent such troubling events, most of us are content just to sit around and watch the news.



The normal distribution ought to be relevant to OC traits, but it probably isn't. If it were, two-thirds of us would be in the middle, within one standard deviation of the mean. Fussy men and women would be further to the right of the curve and angry, controlling men would be at the extreme end. In the case of OC, however, it is more likely that the distribution is *skewed* to the right; i.e., more people are more OC than are less OC. That means that many more people are OC than ought to be the case if OC traits were normally distributed.

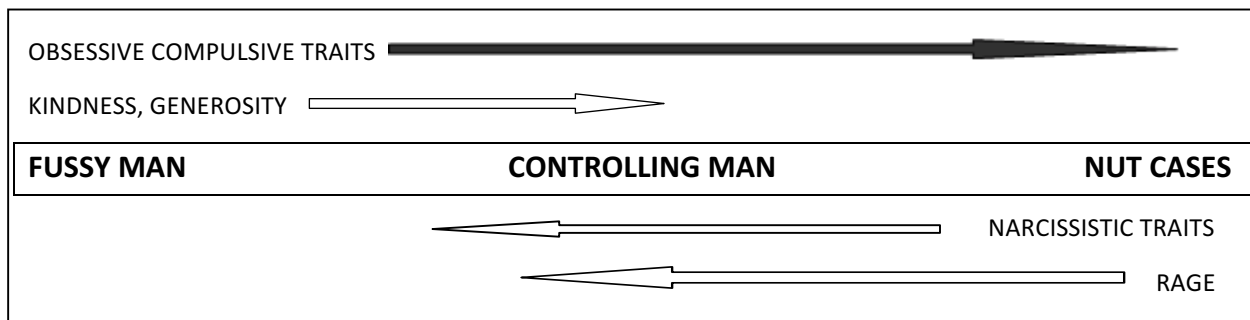
I have no direct to prove that the distribution of OC traits is skewed although it certainly is in certain groups, mostly better educated and more intelligent people. We could test the hypothesis with a thought experiment. Compare, with a little imagination, the standing wave of the symmetric distribution to the steep wave of a skewed distribution. One looks like an ocean swell and the other like a wave about to break. The latter is the

forward-thrusting wave of evolution. Something like this must have occurred as hominids grew more intelligent and speciated themselves away from their dim forebears.

If OC is an exaggeration of conscientiousness, that would explain its persistence and its prevalence; it is “potentially beneficial.” A few OC genes make one conscientious, and natural selection prefers those genes over careless, easygoing genes. Thus, conscientiousness genes spread. The theory is coherent, and if it were true, it predicts that our race will only grow more conscientious, or possibly more rigid and controlling.

As it happens, evolution never selects for a single trait. When a new trait appears, it has to be supported by others as well. So also in one’s personality, which is never a function of just one trait, or five, but numbers of traits that co-occur. People differ, therefore, not only in the number and strength of their OC traits, but in how they interact with other elements of personality. One OC, like Gavin, is kind and generous while another, like Colin, is self-absorbed and full of wrath. The difference between a good OC and a bad OC may not be how OC they are, but whether other elements in their personality direct their traits for good (the Banana-man) or ill (Captain Ahab).

Fussy men and women, for example. They tend to be kind and generous, understanding and tolerant, albeit meddlesome and irritating sometimes. The fussy man has OC traits but he uses them not for his own sake but for the benefit of mankind, or, at least, for the people around him. He simply knows how to do things right. He is a bit compulsive about it, but he is useful to have around. He is well-organized and he likes things to be orderly. He always knows where you can find the needle-nosed pliers or the duct tape or the cumin seeds. When any of those useful items aren’t where they’re supposed to be, he sighs, resigned to the imperfections of the world but not angry about it. Besides, it gives him something to do. He runs off the hardware store (knowing full well that the needle-nose pliers are irretrievably lost) and buys two pair, one of which he will place in its usual, correct place. The other he will put in a special, secret place that only he knows, anticipating that the first pair will be irretrievably lost before very long. Of course, his clever albeit scattered wife will before long discover that secret place, and if there are children around, they know all of his secret hiding places even when he’s forgotten where they are or what’s in them. Another trip to the hardware store, then, and as he goes he reflects that life is like a river, an endless flow of little chores to be done and problems to be solved; imperfect people who get trapped in the eddies and snags and have to be nudged into the softly flowing stream. It is a cheerful reflection. He isn’t Sisyphus, pushing the rock up the hill only to watch it crashing back down. He isn’t really a perfectionist either, because he accepts that life is imperfect – even *he* loses the wretched needle-nosed pliers sometimes. To the fussy man, doing things right is a blessing, an act of accord with the harmony of the universe.



Fussy people usually have a few OC traits, but they are harmless ones, like checking the doors at night or keeping the items in their drawers neat and organized. Mostly, they are *conscientious*, which is a thoroughly *good trait*. There are probably more fussy women than men, probably because the traits of kindness and generosity tend to concentrate in that gender. Have you ever wondered why your mother never complained when she had to

pick up after you or your father, and when she did, it was in a gentle, good-humored way? Well, I hope your mother was like that, because fussy women make very good mothers. Also, fussy men can be very good Dads.

Fussy men and women have not enjoyed the attention of psychiatrists, for the good reason that they don't suffer from fussiness and their level of functioning tends to be high. They are not prone to complain of "symptoms" because they don't necessarily perceive their qualities to be problems at all. Their closest friends make innocent jokes about their eccentricities. When I meet a patient who is a good, fussy OC I am apt to say, If more people in the world were like you, it would be a better place.

INNOCENTS

Medical students in my day were given to teasing the *anal retentives* in the class; it was a time when psycho-analytic clichés were fashionable. It was good-natured teasing, of course, because almost everybody in the class was an *anal retentive*. The ubiquity of OC traits in individuals who are intellectually accomplished is such a truism, we laugh about it.

Why do we laugh about OC? Think about it. OCD is the only medical condition I know that is a reliable source of mirth. Fussy men and women, true innocents, are even more vulnerable to gentle teasing. The poor things are eager, outer-directed and open to experience, especially experiences that require a bit of neatening up. They *like* other people and take pains to help them. They never feel put upon and seldom complain. When they do complain, it is in a good-hearted way, accompanied by a sub-audible sigh, although one of my best friends actually used to say, *Sigh*, at times, usually after I had committed some minor solecism. I suppose she had a *Sigh* tic. Why, then, do we insist on making fun of them?

I put that question to my friend Miles, a learned fellow who deserves to be on the Mount Rushmore of OCs. He said *They are just looking for a bit of spice to season their bleak, wind-swept existence*, which is a nice, nasty way to put it. On second thought, Miles is a controller, too, and no one teases controllers. It makes them mad.

There are good OCs who are conscientious, but fussy and bad OCs who are controlling and antipathetic, but the ones we tease are the good ones. You may not realize that the friends we are most likely to tease are OCs. *OMG, Charlene, do you know that the hangers in your closet are spaced at identical intervals?* You've probably heard someone say, *You're so OCD*, as innocent a remark as, *It's just my OCD again*. Why are OCs so prone to being teased? They are so often the butts of friendly jokes, and sometimes, like Gavin, the butts of jokes that are cruel and stupid.

Such trifling events are a clue to human psychology. Teasing, for example. In children, it is one of those normal compulsions, like the boy in your fourth grade who said, *Carrot-top, Carrot-top*, as soon as he met you in the morning. He is only a child and doesn't understand that teasing has proper rules. One only teases someone with whom one is close; it is done in a good-natured way; and one has to be prepared to be teased back. Teasing without the possibility or reciprocity is bullying. Teasing someone who isn't a close friend or relative is socially inappropriate.

Thus, older siblings tease younger ones, parents tease their children and children tease parents. They do it in a gentle, playful way. It's fun to say to a good friend, *OMG, where did you get that tie?* but it's not OK to say that to a stranger on the elevator. One doesn't tease someone who has a real weakness. That's sadistic, cruel and stupid. A good teaser *wants* to be teased back.

Teasing among friends and in families is a form of social control, the way one shapes the behavior of someone who deviates slightly from the local norm. Teasing, improperly done, can be cruel, but falling short of

cruelty, it is an effective form of behavior modification, which is what social animals do for safety. Deviation from the rules of the herd are potentially dangerous. OCs, therefore, with their perfectly serious idiosyncrasies, can be threatening to the social order, which is no less than conformity done in an utterly careless way. In the face of perfection, tension must be released and so one makes a joke of it.. An OC will never get past such ill-treatment until he finds his tribe. Once he finds them, his eccentricities will be his admission ticket.

We can react sharply to fussy men and women because they take things so seriously. They are always thinking. When you say, *Marcia, you're so OCD about loading the dishwasher*, she is likely to explain precisely why she loads the dishwasher as she does. Having read thus far, you now know to say, *Marcia you're so OC*, and you can observe her response with clinical understanding. She doesn't take it as an insult or an assault on her way of doing things but as an opportunity to share her well-considered rationale. *You should alternate the big dishes with small ones on the lower rack, so the big ones will get more spray. The small ones need less spray, you see. Let me show you.*

It is exquisite attentiveness to detail that makes the good OC stand out from the Philistines. Yet Marcia's mental exertions are the occasion of fun. She is an *innocent*, concerned only with doing right and preventing untoward outcomes, like the damage that will ensue when a plastic container is placed on the bottom-rack. A joke, to her, is a didactic opportunity. *A dishwasher will heat water to between 55 and 75 degrees Celsius. That won't necessarily melt your Tupperware but it may well distort its shape and you won't be able to fit the top back on.*

People tease OCs because they don't have a real weakness at all, but a way of being that is pleasantly strange. I was teasing my little friend who could reduce every number to four when I said, In French, four is *quatre*, which is six. He was only mildly annoyed because it was just water off his back.

People tease OCs because they seem to have come from another planet. In fact, they *live* on another planet, the rich and enticing domain of their fertile minds. They don't necessarily tease back but smile with the joke. A good OC thinks, *This is what they do, this strange tribe of unenlightened souls. But I love them anyway.*

PERFECTIONISTS

If OC traits were only mere foibles, a book like this would be of little importance. OC traits can actually make you sick, if you're not careful:

*Her taste exact
for faultless fact
amounts to a disease.²*

OC is not always a benign condition. There can be complications. For example, the perfectionists, who are OCs of a special order. Russell, the boy who wanted to go to Princeton, was a perfectionist, deliberate and thoughtful, sober and conscientious. People like Russell love school because it measures success with numbers and the goal of school-life is concise: to get a perfect number.

Russell was also a bit of a hypochondriac. In addition to his ADD, he was convinced that he was gluten-intolerant and eating bread or macaroni would give him migraine headaches. Now, perfectionism is a desirable trait in cabinet-makers, cosmetic surgeons and elite athletes. But perfectionists are also prone to worry about their health. In our clinics, the best examples of the perils of perfectionism are patients who don't recover from concussion.

² WS Gilbert, *The Mikado*

In spite of the hysteria that has surrounded the problem of concussion in recent years, almost everyone who has had one gets better in a few days or weeks. Patients who have had severe concussions may take as long as six months to feel like themselves again and as long as a year to be completely symptom-free. When I had mine, it took several months before I was back in fighting trim. Granted, one doesn't want to make a habit of concussing oneself, but a single concussion or even a couple has no long term pathological consequences. (A couple of thousand concussions or sub-concussive blows to the head, on the other hand, as boxers experience and professional footballers, are another matter entirely.)

The reason to send a concussion patient to a specialty clinic like ours is that the patient hasn't recovered but his symptoms have persisted unabated or even worsened. Most of the patients are only a few months out and they're getting nervous. We tell them that the symptoms of a bad concussion may last for some months. They will get better in time. It's always rewarding to treat patients whose conditions are going to resolve on their own.

A substantial number of the patients, however, had their concussion a year ago or two or more. They haven't got better by themselves and some of them are more symptomatic than they were in the first weeks following the injury. This is usually a mystery to the referring physician although not to the patient. He is familiar with the news about concussions in the NFL or among the troops, whose concussions are often the result of blast injuries and a different kind of brain injury altogether. He says, *I was perfectly all right before I was rear-ended.* People who are perfectly all right don't usually have debilitating headaches, insomnia and memory loss after they are rear-ended in the parking lot at Wal-Mart at seven miles per hour.

There are some good reasons why a person might have debilitating headaches and memory loss following a minor injury. Old people and young children are particularly vulnerable. Some patients, especially the OCs, can treat themselves too aggressively and make their symptoms worse. The patient I saw yesterday was neither young nor old but had severe headaches that persisted a year after he was hit on the side of the head with a baseball. It was a real concussion – he was out cold for 5 minutes – but his continuing headaches were the result of the enormous doses of Tylenol® he was taking. These are called "rebound headaches." He'll get better when he stops taking so many pills although it's not always as easy as it sounds.

There are several things one must do to make sure the patient doesn't have something bad going on in his patient's head. That usually doesn't take too long. The next thing to do is find out what's wrong with the patient's *mind*.

Patients who have particular difficulty following mild brain injuries are almost always OCs. The reason is how their minds work. They are prone to obsess, that is, to think so hard that *something is wrong with me* they can actually make themselves sick. It's not that they're hypochondriacs, who worry all their lives that they might be ill. Our OCs are convinced that there is something wrong with their brain.

They know there's something wrong with their brain because they are forgetful, they can't sleep, their energy level is low and they have a headache that won't go away. They began their odyssey at one of those concussion clinics where they were diagnosed and prescribed "brain rest." The peculiar idea that has arisen – absent any empirical data -- is that brain rest is not to work or do housework or exercise or read or watch TV or play videogames or do anything else. I don't know if sex is also abjured but I suppose it's OK if you don't think about it. Why a state of enforced idleness might be restful to one's brain has always been a mystery to me. We

tell patients that they should take it easy, to be sure, but the brain has a good way of telling you that you're doing too much. One gets tired, irritable, inattentive or a headache. At which point, he should have a little lie-down.³

In spite of doing all the right things, our OC friend has persistent symptoms. So, he is referred to a neurologist, has the obligate MRI and may be treated with amitriptyline, Topomax® or trazodone. The symptoms persist, the neurologist knows there's nothing wrong with the fellow's brain and refers him to a psychiatrist. Because psychiatrists tend to be less critical in their appraisal of brain injury effects, the patient's fears of permanent brain injury are gratified, and he is told that his job is to *Learn to grieve for his lost abilities and try to make the best of it*. There is nothing worse one could say, especially to someone who is susceptible to suggestion, as OCs are. Well, what might be worse is to subject the patient to a course of "head injury rehabilitation" or "cognitive remediation." Ministrations of this sort are only likely to aggravate the patient's obsessive self-monitoring.

I mentioned that perfectionists are prone to certain illnesses, like chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia, irritable bowel syndrome and multiple chemical sensitivity, and in a later chapter I shall explain how we think that happens. OCs are not necessarily self-absorbed, although some are. More often, they are absorbed with an idea: *Something is wrong here*. It might be something inside their bodies or something outside that is equally baneful like a dishwasher improperly loaded, the volume control set to an odd number or a sentence unnecessarily festooned with commas. But OC's, an intelligent tribe and proud of it, are particularly vulnerable to the idea that something is wrong with their brains.

A common complaint at the Neuropsychiatry Clinics is the *subjective experience of cognitive impairment*. Middle-aged OCs worry they might be developing Alzheimer's disease. When they are younger, they worry that they have ADD. In fact, minor problems with memory, especially dysnomia, the inability to recall a word or a name, are universal in people past forty and have no pathological significance whatever. Minor problems with inattention and distractibility are ubiquitous at every age. To a mind obsessed with perfection such deviations from the ideal are intolerable and make them sick.

CONTROL

As they are observed and experienced by others, individuals with obsessional personality traits are seen to exercise a marked measure of control over both themselves and their environment. They are cautious, deliberate, thoughtful and rational in their approach to life and its problems and may appear dry and pedantic when those traits are carried to an extreme. They emphasize reason and logic at the expense of feeling and intuition, and they do their best to be objective and to avoid being carried away by subjective enthusiasms. As a result, these individuals often appear sober and emotionally distant, but at the same time they are found to possess great steadiness of purpose, reliability, and earnest conscientiousness. What they lack in flexibility, imagination, and inventiveness, they make up for in a conservative cautiousness about change that provides for a healthy balance to the transient but violent enthusiasms of others (Nemiah & Uhde, 1989, p995).

It is a clue to the authors' proclivities that they chose to characterize the "enthusiasms" of non-obsessives as "violent," but they are right on when they note that the frequency of OC is higher in "upper class persons and in those with higher intelligence levels." People with OC traits are over-represented in the highest ranks of modern meritocratic societies. Many of them have a bad OC trait: they seek to exercise control, not only upon themselves but also on *you*. They usually fail at both.

This is a path that Colin's OC traits may take. I don't dwell on such outcomes with his mother. That controlling little boy might – just might – grow up to be a controlling man.

³ The good thing that most concussion clinics do is to avoid medications for the post-concussion syndrome; meds are more or less contraindicated in the first three months after concussion, although an occasional Advil® or Naprosyn® is OK.

Among all the OC traits, control is potentially the nastiest one. It is usually linked to other infelicitous traits like anxiety, narcissism, catastrophizing and, of course, wrath. Like every obsession, control feeds on itself, and it sometimes takes a malignant course. It is one of those psychological cancers that absorbs one's normal psychology and grows until there is nothing else left. *They are so stupid, it is up to me get it right. It makes me mad when other people are so stupid.* If this is what a man thinks, one can only imagine what a horrible burden it must be and how scary. There is only one thing to do, he thinks. An additional increment of control. *I will get them to do right in spite of themselves.*

People with a controlling disposition can be difficult to work with, as you've probably noticed. They tend to micro-manage, that is, they impose their high intellect and critical judgment upon tasks that are better left to underlings. That neither their experience nor judgment is suited to deal with said tasks doesn't matter to them. That by intruding so into other people's business they neglect their own responsibilities doesn't register, either.

Controlling people are even more annoying to live with. The bitter emotions of a controlling man are governed by this heuristic: *Something is wrong here.* If he simply left it there, and patiently set things to right, he and everyone in his circle would be the better for it. But he can't. That reverberating circuit of *Something is wrong here!* picks up more and more emotional valence as it goes round and round in his head. It emerges as something ugly and riven with generalizations: *Why can't you ever do anything right? You always disappoint me, You are stupid, You are bad.* His analytical mind has a hyperactive error detector, especially for your errors. His obsession with control is a preventive measure, in its warped, unhappy way: *If she is allowed to load the dishwasher improperly the machine will not operate in an optimal way!* This he fears will violate the proper order of things. It is important to do things right. It is no less than dangerous if his wife doesn't. One of them told me once, *When he cleans, he doesn't clean with me. He cleans at me.*

Control is nasty because it is often associated with a nasty emotion, wrath, a form of anger that is fueled by righteous indignation; that is, *I'm not angry. I have a right to be angry, because I'm right.* The wrath of men thus disposed may be beastly but it is an animal expression only on the surface. It originates in his analytical mind. Psychologists who have studied this sort of thing call it a "moral" emotion, occurring as "the result of an appraisal of some deliberate, negligent, or at least avoidable, slight or wrongdoing... most usually directed at another person", and directed towards "punishment for, or correction of, the wrong that has been carried out."⁴ In defense of the Proper Order of Things, therefore, wrath is not only condoned but a moral obligation. Be that as it may, if one's wrath is stirred every time a conspecific commits a deliberate, negligent or avoidable slight or wrongdoing, one will hardly have time for anything else, and such is often the case.

Why are some men obsessed with controlling everything, while most of us are content with a modicum of perceived control over some of the events in our lives?

Psychology takes a positive view of control, as in self-control, autonomy, self-determination, competence and mastery. Everybody wants at least a modicum of perceived control over some of the events in their lives.

An underlying assumption of all control theories is the idea that humans desire to produce behavior-event contingencies and thus exert primary control over the environment.⁵

Our lives are full of behavior-event contingencies. If one drops an egg, it is expected to splat upon the floor. If it just hovered beneath your hand or hit the floor and bounced right up, the events would defy your

⁴ Power and Dalgleish (1997, p.305) Averill (1983) Ortony et al. (1988)

⁵ Heckhausen & Schulz, A Life-Span Theory of Control, Psychological Review, 1995.

expectations of gravity and/or the true nature of eggs. When you drop a token into the turnstile, you expect to hear a *thunk* that signals the thing will turn when you push against its arms. The inanimate world is governed by lawful connections between behavior and event, cause and effect. The lawful order of the inanimate universe is the foundation of all science. It renders at least some aspects of our lives predictable.

There may be forces in the Universe that control the behavior of things but the animate world is less amenable to such forces. People in particular usually defy prediction, let alone control. Life itself, like Love, the destiny of our children and the fate of the bulbs we planted last autumn, is not controllable. It is a stochastic process, that is, intrinsically unpredictable.

We all know that, of course, and in response, we humans have cultivated what psychologists call *perceived control*, the sense that there is at least a probabilistic relation between our behavior and events, and if not, well, we'll just have to make do. Content with perceived control, we are not disheartened when things turn out in unexpected ways. As long as most things go as expected, or some things at least, we're OK, and if nothing happens according to plan, well, we'll try to muddle through.

A sense of perceived control is one of those illusions that makes it possible for people to put up with their lives. Perceived control is important to one's psychology. It is essential to what psychologists call "self-efficacy." It is normal human psychology, "a person's *estimate* that a given behavior will lead to certain outcomes."⁶ Its biological basis is adaptation. We can change our circumstances – outer-directed, or primary control – or we can change ourselves – inner-directed, or secondary control, "to fit in with the world and to flow with the current."⁷ We all exercise primary and secondary control to different degrees in different circumstances. Too much secondary control typifies a submissive individual, too much primary control characterizes the controlling man.

Having a sense of perceived control is associated with good health, achievement, optimism, persistence, motivation, coping, self-esteem, personal adjustment and success in a variety of life domains.⁸ In contrast, the sense that one is not in control is the feeling of helplessness. That has untoward consequences on one's health and emotions and one's relations with other people.

The irony of the controlling man is that he perceives that he is not in control. He is too rigid to change himself and too clumsy to induce others to change. What is to be done? An additional increment of top-down control, that's what, seasoned with a surly expression, threats and a harsh, demeaning tone. He has to do it because otherwise he just feels helpless. *Why can't the animate world behave with the orderliness of a well-tuned machine?*

There is a theory that such individuals express an exaggeration of natural psychology. Control, it is said, is "an extreme on a continuum of evolved harm-avoidance strategies." (Brune, 2006)

To manage such risks, a special motivational system evolved, which we term the security motivation system.... this system is designed to detect subtle indicators of potential threat, to probe the environment for further information about these possible dangers, and to motivate engagement in precautionary behaviors. (Woody & Szechtman, 2011)

The controlling man is poised to detect subtle indicators of potential threat. *I am simply being conscientious*, he must think, and some psychologists agree although they acknowledge that it is an extreme form of conscientiousness. The controlling man is also determined that everyone should be as conscientious as he is. He is obsessed with the dangers that may accrue if his superstitions are violated. His universe is ordered just so, and he is afraid of the consequences of disorder.

⁶ Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unified theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84, 191-215.

⁷ Rothbaum, F, Weisz, JR & Snyder, SS. Changing the world and changing the self: a two stage process of perceived control. *J Personality & Social Psychology*, 42, 5-37, 1982.

⁸ Skinner, EA. A Guide to Constructs of Control. *J Personality & Social Psychology*, 71, 549-570, 1996.

The theory fails because the universe of the controlling man is not well-ordered but precisely the opposite. He thinks he is conscientious but he really is just deceived. He is preoccupied with wrongs that occur all the time, slights and wrongdoings that should be avoidable but they never are. His perceptions are biased towards mistakes. His problem, we have learned, is a hyperactive error detector in his brain.

YOU CAN LOAD THE DISHWASHER ANY DAMN WAY YOU WANT

There is a right way to load a dishwasher and there are a myriad of ways to load it the wrong way. In this regard, I agree with Tolstoy:

Properly loaded dishwashers are all alike; every improperly loaded dishwasher is improperly loaded in its own way.

However, it is also true that it doesn't much matter how you load the dishwasher – within reason, of course – because the modern American dishwasher is a miracle of engineering and will get the dishes clean no matter how you load it. You don't even have to rinse the crumbs off the plates before you put them in. The dishwasher is designed to take care of that too.⁹ You might say that it is over-engineered; not quite to the degree a jetliner is or a nuclear submarine, but sufficiently over-engineered to compensate for the vast numbers of people who rush through the job of loading the dishwasher and aren't particularly fussy.

The human beings are also over-engineered and do quite well, thank you, even when they rush through things and don't make a fuss. As a group, we humans do a good job of compensating for weaknesses and making up for mistakes. We are a disorderly group, too, and hardly ever say our prayers the precise number of times. Taboos simply make us curious about what's on the other side of the taboo. Aches and pains and minor lapses in attention are things most of us put up with without submitting to medical tests or ill-advised treatments. When our cingulate gyrus sends us an error message, most of the time we pay as little heed as we do to speed limit signs. There is a reason, I think, that the number π is ultimately incalculable. Imprecision and uncertainty are simply in the nature of things, and for most of us, that is OK. The controlling man seethes with anger at the very idea. He seems to be angry because the order of the Universe is violated when you mis-load the dishwasher or leave the lights burning. Down deep inside, behind his angry shell, he is afraid of the disorder that pervades the Universe.

Complex biological systems, like human beings, operate successfully, not in an orderly way, but in a coherent way. Individual components of the system function in their own particular way. They respond to the exigencies of the moment, sometimes correctly, sometimes in the wrong direction. Sometimes they overshoot the mark, sometimes they fall short. There is constant cross-talk among all the components, though, and the direction of response can be changed and its magnitude adjusted. The process accommodates the variability in all of the component parts. No single element in the system is indispensable. Every element in the system can play more than one role, which they must do, compensating for weakness or failures in other elements. The system as a whole is not orderly but it has integrity. This is what is known in biology as *homeostasis*. Another word for it is *coherence*. We could also call it harmony or balance or even happiness.

Coherence is an essential element for any complex biological system to function successfully, whether it is a large organization, a society, an ecosystem or a brain. Order is not. A successful system appears to be orderly, when viewed from a distance or from the outside, but when it is examined closely one finds variability, uncertainty, corrective actions undertaken cheerfully and tolerance for mistakes.

Man the Machine is a fallacy. Machines are precise and well-ordered. Biological systems, social systems, the Universe -- they are not machines, being neither precise nor well-ordered. Attempting to impose machine

⁹ *You don't even have to rinse the crumbs off the plates before you put them in. The dishwasher is designed to take care of that too.* That's what they say, anyway. Take it from a fussy man: rinse off the fragments of food first. Nora won't take a plate from me unless the fragments of food have been rinsed off.

order on natural systems, like human beings, is futile. There is harmony in the music of the spheres, but it is the harmony that arises from countless voices each slightly out of tune.