

Book Reviews

Uncertainty: The Soul of Modeling, Probability & Statistics, by William Briggs, hardcover, 258 pp, \$59.75, ISBN 978-3-319-39759-9, Springer International Publishing Switzerland, 2016.

This book has the potential to turn the world of evidence-based medicine upside down. It boldly asserts that with regard to everything having to do with evidence, we're doing it all wrong: probability, statistics, causality, modeling, deciding, communicating—everything. The flavor is probably best conveyed by the title of one of my favorite sections: "Die, *p*-Value, Die, Die, Die."

Nobody ever remembers the definition of a *p*-value, William Briggs points out. "Everybody translates it to the probability, or its complement, of the hypothesis at hand." He shows that the arguments commonly used to justify *p*-values are fallacies. It is far past time for the "ineradicable Cult of Point-Oh-Five" to go, he states. He does not see confidence intervals as the alternative, noting that "nobody ever gets these curious creations correct."

Briggs is neither a frequentist nor a Bayesian. Rather, he recommends a third way of modeling: using the model to predict something. "The true and only test of model goodness is how well that model predicts data, *never* before seen or used in *any* way. That means traditional tricks like cross validation, boot strapping, hind- or back-casting and the like all 'cheat' and re-use what is already known as if it were unknown; they repackage the old as new."

Yes, this book is about probability and statistics, and there is some mathematics in it, but fundamentally it is a book of philosophy. If you follow his blog, wmbriggs.com, you will recognize that he is a devotee of Thomas Aquinas.

The book discusses science and scientism, and belief and knowledge. Chapter Two is about logic, with delightful examples from Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll). Briggs states that an entire

branch of statistics, hypothesis testing, is built around the worst fallacy, the "We-Have-To-Do-Something Fallacy."

Some of the book's key insights are: Probability is always conditional. Chance never causes anything. Randomness is not a thing. *Random*, to us and to science, means *unknown cause*.

One fallacy that Briggs chooses for special mention, because it is so common and so harmful, is the epidemiologist fallacy. He prefers his neologism to the more well-known "ecological fallacy" because without this fallacy, "most epidemiologists, especially those employed by the government, would be out of a job." It is also richer than the ecological fallacy because it occurs whenever an epidemiologist says "X causes Y" but never measures X. Causality is inferred from "wee *p*-values." One especially egregious example is the assertion that small particulates in the air (PM 2.5s) cause excess mortality.

Quantifying the unquantifiable, which is the basis of so much sociological research, creates a "devastation to sound argument...[that] cannot be quantified." Briggs deconstructs famous examples and the "instruments" they use.

We suffer from a crisis of over-certainty, Briggs writes. He believes we need a science that is "not quite so dictatorial and inflexible, one that is calmer and in less of a hurry, one that is far less sure of itself, one that has a proper appreciation of how much it doesn't know."

Statistical significance should be "treated like the ebola virus," he writes, "i.e. it should be placed in a tightly guarded compound where any danger can be contained and where only individuals highly trained in avoiding intellectual contamination can view it."

Briggs will not be well loved by those who write "evidence-based" papers replete with parameters, regressions, and *p*-values. Those who study Briggs will no longer be overawed by such papers, however prestigious the journal that publishes them. But he validates the

importance of first-hand observation, insight, and intuition. To my mind, he shows that the need for the art of medicine is proven by the science.

Despite its heavy subject matter, the book is full of humor and a delight to read and re-read.

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Waking the Sleeping Giant: How Mainstream Americans Can Beat Liberals at Their Own Game, by Timothy Daughtry and Gary Casselman, hardcover, 240 pages, \$24.95, ISBN-10: 0825306795, ISBN-13: 978-0825306792, Beaufort Books, 2012.

How does a minority of Americans with far-left viewpoints representing only 20 percent of the population continually win political elections and drive its agenda, while the other 80 percent (mainstream Americans) lose ground year after year?

Psychologists Timothy Daughtry and Gary Casselman have created a practical manual on how the far left took control of our country and how mainstream Americans can take it back. The authors have mentored business leaders on leadership issues and now bring their techniques to messaging for mainstream American activists.

The sleeping giant is mainstream Americans who are awakening to realize that their country has been stolen by a far-left cultural/political establishment that does not share its values. The authors note that there are about 40 percent of Americans who are self-described conservatives, and another 40 percent who are uninformed or misinformed and who will usually side with the far left that represents the remaining 20 percent. Our job is to educate the uninformed or misinformed 40 percent who, if they knew the real story, would consistently side with conservatives and disavow the far-left agenda.

The book dissects the techniques used by the far left in accomplishing its theft of American culture. The authors then go through a step-by-step process on how to take the message away from the leftists and promote mainstream philosophies. The principles of mainstream activists as set forth by the authors are:

- 1) We are the mainstream and the liberals are the fringe. Act like it.
- 2) Face your fears of disapproval and social unpleasantness.
- 3) Never, ever fall into a defensive position.
- 4) Seize the offensive and stay on it.
- 5) Hit hard and sue for peace.
- 6) Drive the mainstream agenda through the culture and the government.
- 7) Inoculate children against liberalism.

Among these principles, the most important is to remember that we are the mainstream and we don't have to justify our position. It's the radical left that has to justify its position. We should always be on the offensive with the use of the three R's: **Recognize** the way the left wants to frame the narrative, **reframe** the narrative to put the left on the defensive, and **refocus** the topic to drive the mainstream agenda.

This book is a very easy read, written in plain English with very practical suggestions that can be used in everyday life—from kitchen table discussions to PTA meetings to media interviews. The book is highly recommended for mainstream Americans who don't understand what has happened to our country and want to do something about it. It should be mandatory reading for all physicians who care about private medical practice and want to preserve what is left of individual patient care and the patient-physician relationship.

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A Hole In My Life—Battling Chronic Dizziness, by Philippa Thomson, softcover, 244 pp, \$12.99, ISBN: 978-0-9935989-0-6, Philippa Thomson, 2016.

What do you do when you are struck with a medical condition that sporadically incapacitates you and no one in the medical establishment knows what to do with you?

If you are Philippa Thomson, you soldier on to find your way back to health. With eloquence and humor, the author of *A Hole in My Life* tells the story of her battle to get back control of her life while having to deal with a severely disabled son and a husband with renal failure awaiting kidney transplantation.

Thomson's memoir is really two separate stories. The first is her battle with an inner-ear condition that was only recently identified, in the late 1990s—superior semicircular canal dehiscence (SSCD). The condition, caused by a miniscule defect of the bone covering the superior semicircular canal, has essentially evaded medical science until CT scanning became capable of identifying sub-millimeter defects in the bone encasing the inner ear.

The symptoms can be manifold, but most characteristically cause Tullio's phenomenon (sound-induced vertigo), strain-induced vertigo, and autophony (hearing internal noises quite loudly, such as eye movement and heel strike). In Thomson's case, they also provoked panic attacks, which further complicated her clinical picture, delaying her diagnosis and prolonging her suffering. Through mostly her own efforts, she eventually obtained appropriate surgery to correct this disorder. It is a tale of courage, stamina, and triumph against the system.

The second story line is the comparison of medical care in a socialized system compared with care under free-market capitalism. Thomson is from Scotland, and had always been a proponent of the British National Health Service (NHS), like so many who support socialized medicine until they actually have to use it. Her struggle to get help within the NHS is not a pretty picture. She is eventually tossed aside by a system that shows her little compassion. She does not give up. She searches on her own and finds a specialist in the U.S. who can help her. The contrast is not lost on those of us who are proponents of free-market medicine.

The book won the Wishing Shelf Book Award, and a reviewer said, "The author not only has an important tale to tell, but she delivers it with a gold-tipped pen."

To read about Thompson's trek through the NHS and then through the American system is reason enough to buy

this book. For those who have suffered chronic or recurrent dizziness, this book is a must-read.

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Spoilt Rotten: The Toxic Cult of Sentimentality, by Theodore Dalrymple, Kindle, \$8.69, eISBN 9781908096821, London, Gibson Square, 2012.

Theodore Dalrymple is the pen name of Dr. Anthony Daniels, a prolific and erudite essayist and author of more than 10 books on culture, politics, and the arts. As a psychiatrist, he is a trained observer of human behavior.

Daniels, now retired as a psychiatrist, traveled the world and then returned to England where he practiced in East London and then Birmingham. He worked in private practice in a bad neighborhood and also took care of the prison in that same neighborhood, so he had a chance to see the underside of urban British culture and the inhabitants who are living life at the bottom, in and out of prison. For one of his books on culture in poor areas in Britain, he interviewed 10,000 people who had attempted suicide. When he was practicing he was a regular columnist for the London *Spectator*. He now writes for many different outlets and occasionally writes a book.

I have been a prison doctor for 20-plus years, so I was immediately attracted to Daniels when I read some of his essays at *New English Review* and in American media such as *City Journal*, and then his books about interactions with the poor and the drug culture. I found his insights and commentary compelling because he understands poor people and criminals. He is sensible and clear-eyed about morality and behavior as well as about culture and societal dynamics. He is a disciplined, not emotional psychiatrist, with a hard edge. I wish that he was more available for people who need a psychiatrist.

Dr. Daniels understands the human condition as do some of the great psychiatrists I have known, and this separates him from some of the muddle-headed professionals attracted to psychiatry.

Spoilt Rotten is another bravura Daniels performance. He warns that excessive emotion and sentimentality get in the way of good sense and rational, mature virtuous conduct, in private lives, public discourse, and policy making. Dr. Daniels gives the problem of excess emotions a thorough thrashing and explains why compassion and empathy are often phony and solipsistic, making people feel good about how wonderful and well-motivated they supposedly are.

In his witty, refreshing way, Dr. Daniels shows that excess sentimentality produces bad parenting, bad educational policies, and improper public policy especially in law enforcement. Celebration of victimhood makes all bad behavior into a target for medicalization and “treatment.” Why punish a criminal act when you can pretend the bad actor is a victim who needs empathy, and a pill or a pat on the head and some understanding and pity, since bad behavior is not an accountable choice, but the product of circumstances?

Much of this hyper-sentimentality stems from the immediacy of modern media coverage. Everyone wants to be on social media and TV, and media vendors are only too glad to have the constant attention and dollars.

As Dr. Daniels points out, the plight of the poor or some other victim group can stir people up to demand that someone “do something”—and this results in big flows of money.

Socialism and all liberalism are built on sentimentality and the exploitation of empathy and compassion. Rarely do people on the left insist on rationality and practical, sensible approaches to societal problems, with careful assessment of the effects of supposed solutions. Too often they excuse stupid policy with good intentions, and accept programs that may even make things worse, because they are blindly focused on feeling good about their motives and intentions.

Daniels writes: “The cult of feeling destroys the ability to think, or even the awareness that it is necessary to think. Pascal was absolutely right when he said: *Travaillons donc à bien penser. Voilà le principe de la morale.* (Let us labour,

therefore, to think well. That is the principle of morality.)”

I am adding *Spoilt Rotten* to other books by Dr. Daniels that I have read and admired, including *Romancing Opiates*, about the myths of opiates, *Life at the Bottom*, about the poor, and *Admirable Evasions*, about psychological nonsense. His work is a treasure that never disappoints.

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The Pity Party: A Mean-Spirited Diatribe Against Liberal Compassion, by William Voegeli, hardcover, 320 pp, \$22.05, ISBN 978-0-06-228929-2, Broadside Books, 2014.

This is the second book by William Voegeli, who is currently senior editor of the *Claremont Review of Books*. His first book, *Never Enough*, explained why the welfare state always keeps growing, and this one concerns the importance of empathy and liberal cant in the socialist utopian crusade.

The monster administrative state was spawned by stupid liberal ideas, he writes, and if we are ever to rein in the insanity, we need to get into the minds of the well-intentioned but misinformed champions of incompetent “good deeds” whether they come from the left or the right.

Chapter 4 is bluntly entitled “How Liberal Compassion Leads to Bullshit.” It borrows from the work of Princeton philosophy professor Henry Frankfurt a theory that is now 70 years old and not a crude recent invention. Frankfurt settled on the phrase to describe the bull-session nature of the liberal project—exaggerated tales, failure to recognize evidence, and puffery.

Bullshit, writes Frankfurt, is defined by its “lack of connection to a concern with truth.” In some circumstances, a lack of concern with truth is not simply the result of a speaker’s phoniness, but is a shared communicative premise.

Voegeli and I agree enthusiastically

with Frankfurt’s thesis that liberals just spout the necessary bullshit and never ever check the evidence to see whether their ideas work—they just move on to some other proposal.

Voegeli does a fine job of explaining the attractions of liberalism: how it is built on delusions, and why the good feelings generated by liberal advocacy are rewarding though not based in reality. Liberals care about big general concepts—like social justice and elimination of oppression, but they do not really care about real people. They are utopian and selfishly devoted to their grand ideas—not to benefits that could be achieved in the real world. False empathy is a cheap form of self-congratulation and gratification.

Voegeli has repeatedly reminded us that we can’t stop the welfare state. The welfare administrative state continues to grow, just a little more slowly when conservatives are in charge. That’s because the liberal project offers a seductive thing—the state as guarantor of safety, happiness, and ease. Voegeli quotes George Orwell, who said that, given a choice between freedom and comfort, most people want comfort and security rather than the uncertainty of freedom.

When an administration changes, many programs are still on auto-pilot, and the means-tested programs grow without any restraint. Republicans lack the will to say no. The dynamic is to give more and never take back. Margaret Thatcher said it best—“The trouble with socialism is that eventually you run out of other people’s money.” That reality apparently doesn’t temper the continued attraction of the seductive ideological lie.

It is hard to imagine a solution to the problem, but restraining the welfare state is essential.

The reader might enjoy an interview of Voegeli by Peter Robinson, available at http://library.fora.tv/2011/02/09/Uncommon_Knowledge_William_Voegeli.

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