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**HUBRIS SYNDROME: DIMINISHED EMPATHY AND UNBRIDLED
INTUITION**

I have become increasingly interested in two interlocking features that seem to be associated with Hubris Syndrome, namely diminished empathy and unbridled intuition. Neither are mentioned though they are indirectly covered by the 14 signs and symptoms of Hubris Syndrome which I developed with Professor Jonathan Davidson in our article in *Brain* in 2009 (Owen and Davidson, 2009).

Jonathan Davidson was Professor of Psychiatry at Duke University, where with others he had studied mental illness in US Presidents (Davidson et al, 2006). In that paper we excluded from the diagnosis of Hubris Syndrome anyone with depression or Bipolar disorder for many reasons, not least we could not in a historical assessment be as sure as if we were engaging with them as patients to sort out the very obvious interrelationship of a disease from a personality change. For that reason Theodore Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and Lyndon Johnson were excluded from the study because all three had clear evidence of depression and probably Bipolar disorder.

The Symptoms of Hubris Syndrome	
Proposed criteria for Hubris Syndrome and their correspondence to features of Cluster B personality disorders in DSM-IV	
1. A narcissistic propensity to see their world primarily as an arena in which they can exercise power and seek glory;	NPD.6
2. A predisposition to take actions which seem likely to cast them in a good light – i.e. in order to enhance their image;	NPD.1
3. A disproportionate concern with image and presentation;	NPD.3
4. A messianic manner of talking about what they are doing and a tendency to exaltation;	NPD.2
5. An identification of themselves with the nation, or organisation to the extent that they regard their outlook and interests as identical;	Unique
6. A tendency to talk of themselves in the third person or using the royal 'we';	Unique
7. Excessive confidence in their own judgment and contempt for the advice or criticism of others;	NPD.9
8. Exaggerated self-belief, bordering on a sense of omnipotence, in what they personally can achieve;	NPD.1&2
9. A belief that rather than being accountable to the mundane court of colleagues or public opinion, the court to which they answer is: History or God;	NPD.3
10. An unshakable belief that in that court they will be vindicated;	Unique
11. Loss of contact with reality; often associated with progressive isolation;	APD3&5
12. Restlessness, recklessness and impulsiveness;	Unique
13. A tendency to allow their 'broad vision', about the moral rectitude of a proposed course, to obviate the need to consider practicality, cost or outcomes;	Unique
14. Hubristic incompetence, where things go wrong because too much self-confidence has led the leader not to worry about the nuts and bolts of policy;	HPD.5

NPD = Narcissistic Personality Disorder only in DSM-IV; APD = Anti Social Personality Disorder in both DSM-IV & ICD-10; HPD = Histrionic Personality Disorder in both DSM-IV & ICD-10

We saw Hubris Syndrome as including a narcissistic propensity to see the world as an arena to exercise power and seek glory; exaggerated self-belief bordering on a sense of omnipotence and accountability only to a 'higher court' such as history or God and listed as in the table five unique features. These symptoms were mapped against the American Psychiatric Association *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders 4th edition* (DSM IV) criteria for narcissistic personality disorder (NPD), antisocial personality disorder and histrionic personality disorder. This table serves to distinguish Hubris Syndrome from other seemingly related disorders.

Recently I played a small part in examining with Christos Liapis and Nassir Ghaemi and Shannon Dalley at the Mood Disorder program in the Department of Psychiatry at Tuft's Medical Center in Boston, the criteria to assess personality traits and temperaments that might be related to Hubris Syndrome and this work will, I hope, be published soon. Also reflected in an essay in a book by Palgrave Macmillan entitled *The Intoxication of Power* later this year. It examines in a literature review of 32 papers features that could be related to Hubris Syndrome rather than studying Hubris Syndrome itself. It identifies potential risk factors for Hubris Syndrome starting with the fact that some normal people are more optimistic than one would expect and this is called in the research literature 'positive illusion' (Taylor and Brown, 1988) in contrast to 'depressive realism' (Moore, Fresco, 2012). It also identifies that drugs (in particular steroids and amphetamine) were a factor as was male gender, a history of neurotic behavior, psychosis and diminished empathy. The extent to which depression may be associated with normal or increased empathy is something deserving greater study, but it is an undoubted research finding that diminished empathy is a feature of Hubris Syndrome.

Also recently it has also been a pleasure for me to collaborate with Guy Claxton of the University of Winchester and Eugene Sadler-Smith of the University of Surrey to write 'Hubris in leadership: A peril of unbridled intuition?' published in the journal *Leadership* this year (Claxton, et al, 2015). I have observed over the years that with the diminished empathy that often accompanies hubris comes an ever greater reliance on intuition and with the lack of empathy the intuition risks becoming unbridled and dangerous. We argue in our paper "that intuition, existing as it does at the nexus of cognition and affect, is a central factor and that when intuition becomes misunderstood, unchecked or unbridled within the 'cognitive economy' of a powerful individual, hubristic behaviour is more likely to appear."

Hubris is an occupational hazard for political, military and business leaders. Having focussed over the last decade on hubris in politicians today I am more concerned about hubris in business. For the last 20 years I have earned my living in business. I have served on the Boards of the international UK textile company, Coats Viyella and the large US healthcare company, Abbott Laboratories. After I left the Board Abbvie split off as a pure pharma company and has been much in the news for its recent \$21 billion acquisition. For ten years I was chairman of a UK Stock Exchange company trading Russian steel and iron ore as well as energy. A decade ago I was Chairman of the Russian company, Yukos International, whose parent company was run by Mikhail Khodorkovsky who was jailed and the company is now part of Rosneft, Russia's largest oil company.

In the business world, the 'hubris hypothesis' was first put forward by Roll (1986) in a study of corporate mergers and acquisitions. Roll suggested that bidding-firm managers make mistakes in evaluating the worth of target firms, but undertake the acquisitions anyway with the 'overbearing presumption' that their valuations are correct but which results in them paying too much for their targets (Roll, 1986: 200). Acquisition behaviour has been taken as a potential indicator of hubris by Sonnenfeld (2011) and he suggested that CEO intuitions have a habit of overriding rational analyses particularly where a successful but hubristic CEO (such as former Vodafone boss Chris Gent) had a track record of gambles that happen to have paid-off to their credit (Smit and Moraitis, 2010).

Research work suggests two main mechanisms that might underlie this kind of overconfidence and propensity to risk taking. First, hubristic CEOs may overestimate their own problem-solving capabilities and their company's resource capabilities, second, they may tend to underestimate the resources required and the uncertainties faced (Kahneman and Lovallo, 1993; March and Shapira, 1987). Shipman and Mumford (2011) found that overconfidence and incautious risk taking is not necessarily disastrous (indeed high levels of confidence are vital in business leadership, Hayward, 2007).

An interesting book *Think Again: Why Good Leaders Make Bad Decisions and How to Keep It from Happening to You* (Finkelstein et al, 2008) has the authors identifying four common

sources of error: misleading experiences, misleading prejudgements, inappropriate self-interest and inappropriate attachments. In relation to inappropriate attachments, Andrew Fastow, who became Enron's chief financial officer in 1998, developed an excessive attachment to the company, whereby he saw himself as a 'hero' to Enron, and this led him to take decisions which helped cause the downfall of his company and sent him to prison. When Enron was declared bankrupt on 2 December 2001 it employed some 20,000 staff and was one of the world's major electricity, natural gas, construction, pulp and paper companies with revenues of nearly \$111 billion. Its collapse led to the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 which has had a big impact on US corporate governance procedures, but as yet not matched by research into the neuro-physiological basis of hubris.

Contemptuous behaviour often goes with hubris and was something the Greeks focused attention on. Contempt is hubristic behaviour to others; when it entails lying it suggests the recklessness of someone who has lost touch with reality and the danger that they might be found out by a court of law. Contempt of court is very serious because it undermines an essential safeguard in our democracy, namely that the truth and only the truth is told in court. Contempt of Parliament likewise. Even if contempt involves only a relatively small point it should always, in my view, be pursued in the courts as a deterrent. This is particularly important where it involves high-profile leaders.

When Lord Browne, the former chief executive of BP, invoked the power of a court of law Mr Justice Eady referred to Browne's 'willingness to tell a deliberate lie to the court'. He said of the lie that 'it may be that it should be addressed as contempt or as some other form of criminal offence', although he added that he had decided not to refer the case to the Attorney General for possible prosecution. He did say, however, 'I am not prepared to make allowances for a "white lie" told to the court in circumstances such as these – especially by a man who prays in aid his reputation and distinction, and refers to the various honours he has received under the present government, when asking the court to prefer his account of what took place.' When Browne's attempts to overthrow this ruling were rejected by the House of Lords, when it still had judges sitting on cases in Parliament and before the establishment of a separate Supreme Court, the injunction was lifted, and Browne resigned at once from BP on 2 May 2007.

In the case of President Clinton lying about sexual risk-taking, as in Browne's case of lying about homosexual behavior, it was judged by the public as falling into a separate category as understandable. This was evident during Clinton's impeachment procedures. Action under

impeachment was the only sanction available to challenge a US President and not to have invoked it risked condoning the lie. In my view US politicians were right to invoke the impeachment procedure but they were also correct to use their common sense to drop impeachment after the hearings and let him continue in office, reflecting the American people's toleration of Clinton's false responses in his deposition. At the end of Clinton's period in office he accepted a two-year suspension of his law licence in Arkansas and a \$25,000 fine.

Corporate hubris is something that is potentially more damaging than individual hubris because it operates at company level where leaders can 'infect' the organization in which they work. It is at least possible that it may have been the detection of hubristic traits in Lord Browne, even before the legal case, that brought Peter Sutherland, as BP's chairman, to argue to the rest of the Board against extending Browne's term of office. If that was so, the law case justified Sutherland's determination. According to the *Guardian* of 9 March 2009, Sutherland cited the relative recovery in the fortunes and reputation of BP since Browne's departure as a reason for making performance-related share issues to his successor and snubbed Browne by excluding him from the incentive payment for which he was eligible for 2006.

This BP chief executive case also raises legal issues on whether there was BP corporate hubris over safety expenditure in relation to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico which is being tried in America still in 2015. Separating the roles of chief executive and chairman, common in the UK but rare in the US, may yet be justified in the case of BP. In the US more weight is given to the role of the senior non-executive and to boards meeting from time to time without the company's fully employed directors being present. Both systems have merits in my experience as a board member in the US and the UK. What is vital is that boards monitor very closely their chief executive and such other executives that may operate with independent authority so that they can pick up hubristic traits and the signs and symptoms of gathering hubris. Alertness is particularly important when the company is seemingly doing well, because it is much easier to relax and miss signs that are more likely to be picked up if business is poor.

A survey of 375 company chairmen in the UK and non-executive directors, conducted by the remuneration consultants MM&K and the headhunters Hanson Green, revealed that a quarter of non-executives said they were unsure they could control chairmen and chief executives and a further 10 per cent said they knew they could not. This is a depressing finding for shareholders and the wider public since it means they cannot rely on non-

executives unless significant changes are made in the balance of power within the company.

In her book *Fool's Gold: How Unrestrained Greed Corrupted a Dream, Shattered Global Markets and Unleashed a Catastrophe* Gillian Tett, as US managing editor of the *Financial Times* writes:

I am still trying to make sense of the last decade of grotesque financial mistakes. I have found myself drawing on my training as a social anthropologist before I became a journalist What social anthropology teaches is that nothing in society ever exists in a vacuum or in isolation A 'silo' mentality has come to rule inside banks, leaving different departments competing for resources, with shockingly little wider vision or oversight. The regulators who were supposed to oversee the banks have mirrored that silo pattern too, in their own fragmented practices. Most pernicious of all, financiers have come to regard banking as a silo in its own right, detached from the rest of society.

This acute analysis demonstrates how the 2008 banking and business crisis involving what were large and failed British banks – first RBS and then HBOS Halifax and the Bank of Scotland - has many deeply rooted factors. Since then we have had the Libor scandal involving Barclays and other banks like HSBC called to account. The Cooperative Bank, with whom I have banked for decades, came spectacularly unstuck over ethical and effective leadership questions. This massive global financial bubble in New York and London, from the bursting of which millions of people suffered, is very clearly a case of collective hubris.

When I asked a banker friend why no one had been able to blow the whistle on what was going on his answer was simple. He said that anyone in banking who had had the temerity to argue that his bank was following the wrong course would simply have lost his job and there is some evidence that this did happen to a few whistleblowers. What makes the recent collective hubris so alarming is that it was also so blind. Those participating at high levels in the financial bubble now confess, as, before, many of them admitted privately, that they simply did not understand the game that they were playing. The complexity of the securitised financial world, collateral debt obligations, credit default swaps, was beyond many people's comprehension, particularly non-executives and some regulators.

Many bankers and businessmen, not just politicians, become susceptible collectively to what Keynes called 'animal spirits'. Alan Greenspan, the former chairman of the US Federal Reserve Board, called it 'irrational exuberance' – note the word 'irrational'. He has had the grace to apologise for his own excess, not something we have yet heard from many politicians. Yet booms and busts go with the territory of risk-taking capitalism: sweep it all aside and you are left merely with a bureaucracy. What is needed for capitalism to be tolerable

in the 21st Century are specific solutions and greater sanctions, otherwise we can be certain that the ‘animal spirits’ will return. Greed, hubris and exuberance need to be kept in check and we know from experience the best curb is the fear of disgrace, bankruptcy, prison and penury. Such sanctions are individual and national, not company-wide and global. The court room can bite, the rest is talk. The Americans understand this better than the British but President Obama has not, sadly, had the same courage as President Franklin Roosevelt in encouraging the US courts to act.

An interesting phenomenon is media praise and the awarding of ‘celebrity status’ to CEOs. Does this help to create hubris? The media promotes a romantic, larger-than-life aura of talent and invincibility. Part of this mystique often involves the myth of an infallible intuition. CEOs are all too often depicted as being ‘in control’, ‘macho’ leaders who can ‘manage from the gut’. For example, ‘Straight from the Gut’ is the subtitle of the best-selling CEO biography of Jack Welch, the American former head of General Electric Company (GEC), considered by some to have been infected by hubris at various points in his career. Welch exhibited some self-awareness when he referred to confidence as being a ‘razor’s edge’, recognizing its ‘dark side’ (Conger, 1990), which may lead to bosses getting ‘too full of themselves’ and falling victim to hubris (Hayward, 2007: 14).

Intuition, as we argue in our paper (Claxton, Owen and Sadler-Smith, 2015) involves a mental leap. It is not part of a logical continuum or the steady application of reasoning ending with a commonsensical judgement. The leap is often ascribed to being one of experience, instinct or faith. As well as varying in intensity, they may also vary in their valence (positive signalling ‘attraction’; negative signalling ‘avoidance’) (Sadler-Smith, 2010). Intuitive decision making can be a double-edged sword for, even when based on reasoning or perception the leap of the imagination within it may compound but also confound reason (Myers, 2002). There is a fascinating relationship between hubris and pathological gambling (Owen and Davidson, 2009). In laboratory settings intuitive judgements have been shown to be systematically wrong (Kahneman and Tversky, 1986; Gilovich et al., 2002).

The Somatic Marker Hypothesis (SMH) (Bechara and Damasio, 2005; Damasio, 1994) and the associated program of research (Dunn et al., 2006) provides physiological evidence for the visceral (‘gut feel’) affective responses in decision making under uncertainty and risk. In my lecture (Owen, 2009) honouring the late David Marsden I

suggested we could learn more about the hypothesis from studies about the secondary prevention of post-traumatic stress disorder and the immediate treatment with the beta-blocking drugs. The fact that after a long argument PTSD was accepted as acquired has also undoubtedly helped me over my claim that Hubris Syndrome is acquired.

I have tried to study the late Steve Jobs of Apple, one of the most interesting modern business leaders. The woman who lived with Jobs for five years until 1989, and about whom Jobs said ‘I don’t know that anyone will ever understand me better than she did’, after reading a psychiatric manual about Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) felt Jobs perfectly met the criteria: ‘it fits so well and explains so much of what we had struggled with, that I realized expecting him to be nicer or less self-centred was like expecting a blind man to see. . . and the capacity for empathy is lacking’ (Isaacson, 2011: 263–266). Hayward writing in 1997 considered that Jobs displayed overweening pride (one of the signs of hubris), and argued that during his failed sojourn at NeXT, Jobs ‘relied too heavily on his own gut, rather than get the right help or seek external feedback’ (p. 72). In Jobs’ own words ‘you always have to keep pushing to innovate’. That ‘push’ may have stemmed in large part from a visit Jobs made to India in 1974 and discovering Zen Buddhism which had a deep influence on him throughout his life:

He attributed his ability to focus and his love of simplicity to his Zen training. It honed his appreciation for intuition, showed him how to filter out anything that was distracting or unnecessary, and nurtured in him an aesthetic based on minimalism. (Isaacson, 2011: 564).

At times Jobs appeared to have developed unbridled hubris. As we argued in our article ‘Hubris in leadership: A peril of unbridled intuition?’ hubris can be bridled when the intuitive and analytical systems are in balance, the feeling of rightness is subject to analysis and evaluation is done through conscious deliberation and discussion, quiet reflection and debate and public testing (Figure 1(a)). Judgments are held back while public and private appraisal takes place. The individual can switch cognitive gears.

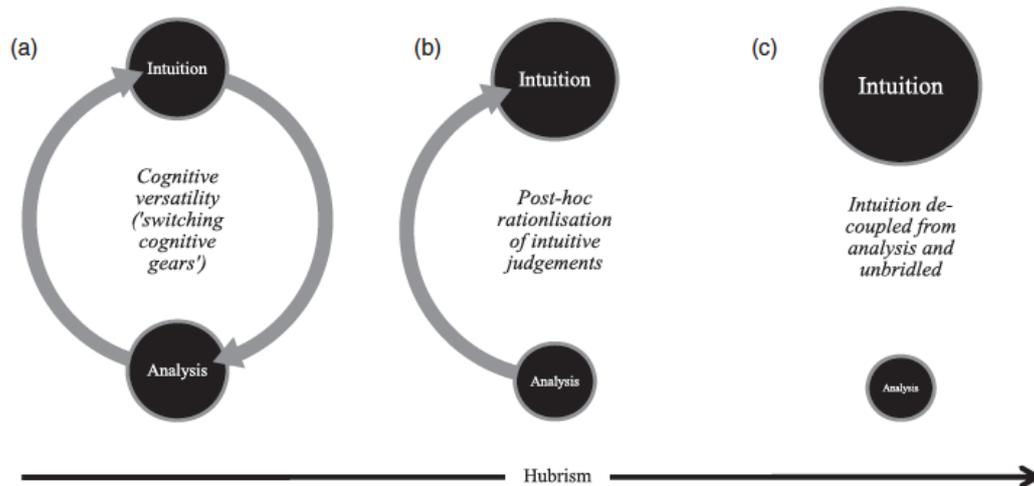


Figure 1. The crowding-out and de-coupling of intuition and analysis associated with hubris.

By contrast with developing Hubris Syndrome the feeling of rightness is self-strengthened and operates unchecked. The switching between the reflexive intuitive mode and the reflective analytical mode does not take place, self-checking breaks down, intuition ‘crowds-out’ rational analysis highlighted in (Figure 1(b)) and the leader becomes ‘stuck’ in an intuitive mode in which facts are ignored.

In the last stage of the line of hubrism denoted in the slide public dialogue may be abused, so that instead of being tested in public debate, ‘discussion’ and ‘dialogue’ are preorchestrated, supported by sycophants and dissenters seen as disloyal. This stage, (Figure 1(c)) is one of unbridled intuition. Not only does reasoning, contemplating and debating break down, but the feeling of rightness may also be concealed under a cloak of humility.

How can diminished empathy, or unbridled intuition be triggered in the brain of someone who acquires hubris? A few years ago Professor Kapur, then the Dean of the Institute of Psychiatry drew to my attention a paper on the effects of a placebo induced dopamine release in Parkinson’s Disease. (Lidstone et al, 2010) When I read the paper I was very impressed and referred to it on a number of occasions in papers with the hope that more research would follow. I wondered whether expectations held the clue to the trigger for Hubris Syndrome, after all the hubristic leader’s mind is full of expectations of success, expectations of reward – expectation fills their lives.

Then I read an article by Erik Vance (2014) in *Discover* magazine which made many

things clearer to me about what in layman's language Sarah Lidstone, who had led the brain-imaging experiment, had done. She had brought 40 patients with mild Parkinson's into the laboratory for a simple drug therapy and explained that some would get their usual dose of Parkinson's medication, which boosts the brain's dopamine levels. The others, she said, would get an inactive pill that looked just like their usual drug; what we doctors call a placebo. Then she described to her patients how they would lie in a high-resolution positron emission tomography (PET) scanner for as long as 90 minutes while the machine took pictures in 2-millimeter increments of their nucleus accumbens, the region deep in the brain which among other things controls reward and motivation.

When her patients emerged from the scanner, Vance describes how many of them moved easily, as one would expect after a dose of their medication. One older patient with a tall, stooped frame arrived in a wheelchair. He took the pill, and, after the scan, walked out past his wheelchair and up a flight of stairs to the debriefing room. When Lidstone told him: There was no drug. Everyone in the trial got the same thing — a simple placebo pill, he laughed at her," Lidstone says, "He was like, 'Are you serious? I can't believe I was able to walk like this on my own without my medication.' "

Whether this patient improved "on his own" is the key point. As doctors know, Parkinson's patients are especially susceptible to the placebo effect — the phenomenon by which a condition improves solely because the patient believes treatment has occurred. When Lidstone's team analyzed their patients' brain activity, they found the PET images showed dopamine, in Vance's words, "flooding the synapses in the crucial motor control region of their brains, just as surely as from a dose of medication. It was the first time placebo responses in Parkinson's disease had been definitively linked to a natural burst of dopamine."

Lidstone said to Vance "I think the idea of patients being able to heal themselves is very powerful." Lidstone has not yet published any further work in this area as she has been training as a doctor of medicine in neurology.

Vance, in that same article, then described meeting a neurologist, Luana Colloca, doing placebo research in a laboratory tucked into a small corner of the sprawling National Institutes of Health complex in Bethesda, Md. He describes her laboratory as containing an electric chair, in which he will, as if he is a patient, receive an electric shock, and a few odd little instruments, like a bike helmet that blows air on the face to make one

anxious. An assistant then sticks sensors below his eye, on his chest and on his hand to measure his reactions — sweating, flinching, heartbeat. But it is the electrodes on the back of his hand that has his attention. That is where Colloca will repeatedly zap him mildly and sometimes not so mildly. A computer screen, Colloca explains, will warn him which shock he will receive — a green screen for a mild zip and a red one for a blast she has ranked on a pain scale as six out of 10. Colloca explains she will then rate the pain of each shock as they go. Vance goes on to say, “Alone in the room, I quickly learn to hate the red screen. It’s not technically torture, but it really hurts — my foot twitches with each shock — and I find myself fretfully counting seconds between the red screen and the jolt. We go three rounds of 18 shocks each. In the third round, I notice that the diminished “green” shock has gotten slightly worse, mounting from a 1 to a 2 on my pain scale. I worry momentarily that I’ve somehow short-circuited my hand.”

Once the session is done Colloca returns and tells Vance he has a decent tolerance to pain. But a sheet of paper in her hand says the “red” shock represented about 101 milliamps — not even enough to power a light bulb. The first two rounds of shocks was about 40 milliamps. As to the third round “something that nearly topples me out of my chair”, Vance describes, “For that one, she fired every shock at full blast. Yet the shocks that came after a green screen felt far less painful — barely a 2 on my pain scale.”

Essentially, in the first two rounds of shocks Vance’s brain tied “less pain” with “green screen.” So in the third, when a green screen was paired with harder shocks, his brain released opioids rapid-fire to dampen the increased pain. A high tolerance to pain, but it seems he was kind of gullible. Vance describes how Colloca says not to think of himself as gullible, but rather as a good learner. In two rounds of shocks, his brain learned to activate complex pathways — starting in his prefrontal cortex and trickling through to more primitive parts — every time he saw a green screen. Vance ends his description by saying that in 2006 Colloca found that this kind of limited placebo “learning” stays with a person for days. “Theoretically, with lots more time in her terrible chair, the effect could be cemented in my brain for years.”

So is this cementing of expectations an explanation for how Hubris Syndrome appears to stay for months and years in someone who has acquired it? Perhaps in a decade we will have an explanation for what Bertrand Russell called the intoxication of power and we will know more about an in built brain mechanism that allows some of the powerful

to acquire Hubris Syndrome. I say some, because I am not yet convinced that there is only one mechanism that triggers Hubris Syndrome inside the brain. The Daedalus Trust (<http://www.daedalustrust.com>), which I chair, is established to learn more about the generality of hubris and is firmly founded on the belief that our work must be multidisciplinary. We will avoid searching only for a medical model and combine other disciplines, as we did in a recent day long meeting at the RSM with the British Psychological Society. We seek to explore the connections with philosophy and even anthropology.

END

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