Rare and Singular Talent

I object to the usurpation of the word "savant" to refer to a clever autistic individual—and to the destruction of its original meaning of a scholar, a person of learning in literature or science—as used by Oliver Sacks in his letter "Musical ability" (5 May, p. 621).

When the talents of some of these autistic children were discovered, the seeming paradox gave rise to the term "idiot savant." The word "idiot" has apparently become politically incorrect, so was dropped, without any replacement.

It is ironic that this usage is perpetuated by one of the foremost true savants of our day, Oliver Sacks, as well as by his respondents. Can we compromise by using "autistic savants?"

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Response: I share Frey's objections to the misuse of the word "savant" (in such terms as "idiot savant," "savant syndrome," and so forth) even though this usage goes back more than a century. One needs an entirely different word for these rare and singular skills, which sometimes seem so remote from anything in common experience.

I do not think that "autistic savants" is a satisfactory compromise, for it not only perpetuates the misuse of the word "savant," but implies that such skills may be confined to the autistic. Although they are, indeed, far commoner in the autistic, by a factor which may approach 1000, they may, on occasion, appear in "normal" people too. This is especially true of extraordinary calculating gifts—and these, interestingly, have a markedly increased incidence in mathematicians, although no consistent relation to general mathematical powers. Thus, while prodigious calculating powers appeared in early childhood in Euler and Gauss, there was no hint of these in Newton, Leibniz, or Galois (*1*). The talent is thus analogous, in this and other ways, to absolute pitch.

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References

1. S. Smith, *The Great Mental Calculators* (Columbia, New York, 1983); E. T. Bell, *Men of Mathematics* (Penguin, London, 1953).

IL-12 Possibilities

In his Research News article about the cytokine interleukin-12 (IL-12) (9 June, p. 1432), Stephen S. Hall lists some of the diseases that might be treated or prevented by the use of IL-12 as a drug (AIDS, leishmaniasis, malaria, tuberculosis, and schistosomiasis). This list reads like Niger's serious disease roster. Later in the article, a drug company executive is indirectly quoted as saying that developing a drug for a disease that affects people in primarily poor countries could be a "disaster" for a company, as this could lead to huge costs and little or no revenues (p. 1434).

In a land where suffering is an everyday occurrence, it is both extraordinary and ordinary that there could be an exploitable link between the illnesses listed—extraordinary because we have the opportunity to relieve some of this pain, ordinary because this chance could be abandoned for the sake of profit. What is the purpose of science if not to aid humanity?

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