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DNA of Mathematics

Mehran Basti
FriesenPress (Nov 20, 2014)
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A mathematician muses on how scientific theories have been used and misused through history.

“We need to keep science from being used as a political and social tool in the power struggle of the few over others,” Mehran Basti argues in *DNA of Mathematics*. Drawing on his academic specialty in mathematics, Basti explores how scientific theories have been used and misused through history.

Basti grew up in Iran, where he studied science at Tehran’s Pars College. Since obtaining a PhD from Cambridge University, he has been a visiting lecturer in Iran and North America. His topic of expertise is Riccati differential equations, which he refers to as “the DNA of mathematics”—the basic building blocks running through all mathematic structures. He is also intrigued by how scientific theories have influenced history, as when Nazis twisted Darwinian notions to their own ends. Einstein and the Holocaust in popular culture are two of the book’s particular preoccupations.

The book lacks focus due to frequent unrelated asides. Lists of hit songs and World War II–themed movies feel irrelevant, and identifying the famous alumni of institutions Basti’s worked at seems like name-dropping. Facts are often reported as if straight from Wikipedia (“You may see [7.1], or the internet to learn more”), and excessively long quotes from other writers sometimes drown out the author’s own voice. Crucially, DNA is not discussed in any depth until chapter 10. In addition, there are punctuation problems, missing articles, odd wording, and one reference to pages that do not exist. Although the copious illustrations break up the text nicely, they are mostly stock or clip-art images.

On the plus side, Basti maintains a disciplined scientific structure, with numbered headings like “1.3—New Techniques.” The references and index are impressively thorough. The book is most interesting when it makes pertinent connections, such as how math underlies music, observing that Einstein was an enthusiastic violin player.

However, the good points cannot overcome some central issues. The book makes bold claims, such as that the universe is not expanding and the speed of light is not constant, only supporting them with a mixture of religious statements and private theories (“God created it as it is” and “This is only my personal understanding”). It may be difficult to grant credibility to a scientist who dismisses the big bang because it was theorized through “semi-broken scientific methods” and seems to have a personal vendetta against Stephen Hawking.

Most importantly, the mathematics that forms the book’s basis is never fully explained. “Readers who are not familiar with mathematics can just glance over this book,” the author suggests. Alas, this means the book will likely fail to connect with laymen.

REBECCA FOSTER (October 14, 2015)

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