

What gives us our personality? Nature takes on nurture

It was back in about 1610 that Shakespeare coined the phrase we still use today to question why we are the way we are. 'A born devil on whose nature nurture can never stick,' says Prospero of savage Caliban in *The Tempest*.

Yet while we still debate the merits of 'nature versus nurture' – DNA versus upbringing – 404 years on, some experts now argue that our genetic inheritance has virtually nothing at all to do with how our personalities are formed.

Oliver James, child clinical psychologist and author of *How to Develop Emotional Health*, told *Metro*: 'It is almost definitively proven by the Human Genome Project that personality is not caused by genes. It's one of the best-kept scientific secrets at the moment.'

Study after study after study has shown either zero effect of genes or very, very little effect. The question is: At what point will the scientists accept that the hypothesis is false?

Oxford University neuroscientist Baroness Susan Greenfield has a slightly different take.

'My own view is that although genes are necessary, they're not sufficient,' she said. 'So the idea that trapped inside the DNA is an extrovert personality, I think, is a very misleading one.'

'Just because DNA is clearly crucial, it's a very indirect contribution. It's not one that you can map directly – the gene for good housekeeping, the gene for being witty and so on – it doesn't work like that.'

'The popular thinking nowadays is that the two are inextricably linked. That you can't really talk about expression of final behaviours without relating the genes interacting with the environment.'

But she dismissed the idea that you can track character traits 'down to a single gene', adding: 'It's like the famous butterfly flapping its wings and changing the weather on the other side of the world. You can't do it backwards. If I showed you a sparking plug, you wouldn't be able to show me how a car works.'

Both James and Greenfield agree that environmental factors should be our focus.

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'We, as human beings, are very dependent on our environments,' said Greenfield. 'That's why we occupy more ecological niches than any other species on the planet – because we're freed up from the tyranny of our genes so that we can actually benefit from experiences and adapt to our environment.'

Greenfield also warns against any effort to offer a basic explanation for a machine as sophisticated as the brain.

'Someone once said, for every complex situation, there's always a simple answer, and it's always wrong,' she said.

Personality shaped by nature or nurture

What shapes our Personalities?

Our big part of what defines our personalities, besides our interests, are our emotions, right? We often determine by: "Are they happy a lot? Are they grumpy all the time? Are they constantly positive? Are they selfish? Are they caring and giving? Are they bubbly? Are they quiet?" Think about the last time you talked about someone's personality, and what words you used. "Oh, she's just such a happy person!".

So we understand that "emotions" of a person can define their personality, perhaps if a person always has an emotion, so I now want to talk about WHY some people may be happier, or sadder, or angrier, or more selfish.

The Purpose of our Emotions

I've written this in another article, but I believe all emotions are similar to physical pain and their purpose is to help us survive better. Sadness is there to help us realise we don't want to be in that situation. Anger helps us fight or dash off so we don't get taken advantage on. Fear helps us get out of situations that may cause us danger. Happiness helps us realise we are great where we are, and that we shouldn't change anything. This is similar to the feelings of hunger and pain. You touch the stove and instantly feel pain, so you move your hands away. If that didn't happen, you wouldn't know this was bad, and eventually your hands would be completely burned. If we didn't know how to feel hunger, we'd probably die of starvation because we didn't know we had to eat.

Though there are lots of loopholes in emotions, such as sometimes the very existence of sadness is what causes suicide, and that I believe is when the person is absolutely unable to get out of a bad situation, and they believe death is their escape. But, we won't get into that.

So when we were born, do we get a personality, or did it happen along the way?

I firmly believe that it's a combination of both.

Yes, some people seem to be born shyer than others, they may seem to care more about themselves, but I believe that could also be due to what their parents, grandparents and even great parents went through. Selfish, again, is another survival instinct. We are selfish because we need to think of ourselves to live, otherwise we could easily let ourselves suffer and give all the benefits to others. While that may be good, but that means you'd just easily die.

Think of it as evolution, you went through something that lead you to be more cautious, afraid and think more for yourself so you can survive better, you are likely to pass that down to your kids, right? That's why I believe that often, you see kids having certain traits of their parents. Because not only physical features get passed on, emotions do as well!

How does nurture help with all of this?

I believe nurture can really change a person, for example: You have someone born very selfish, and want everything to him. However, you can teach this child that it's alright to share, and that it won't lead hi to lose out on anything. Eventually, this child may even realise that his experiences are completely different, so there's no need to be afraid or selfish.