

We Can't Help It!

Sally was getting frustrated with her two-year old daughter who was having yet another tantrum. "She's SO strong-willed and determined", groaned Sally. "Well, so are you!" volunteered her friend. "Her genetic inheritance is her genetic inheritance, you know. It's in her genes - she can't help it!"

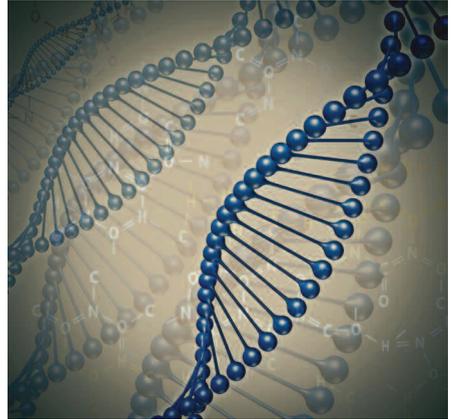
Some people do seem by their very nature to be much more agreeable - kinder and more selfless than others. So just how much are we responsible for our behaviour and how our life develops?

Nature and Nurture

Genes are not the only factor: environment, especially in childhood, can be very influential on subsequent adult behaviours. For example, abused children can grow up to be abusers, while on the other hand children can develop useful skills by watching and working with relatives.

Additionally, we all know examples of children who seem to have very similar characteristics to one or both parents, or some other close relation. This includes physical characteristics, interests, habits, skills and personalities. Some characteristics do seem to be inherited. Indeed, certain serious medical conditions are definitely known to be inherited genetic disorders.

There have been many scientific studies on genes, but there is no clear consensus about precisely what is inherited. Key research has involved sets of identical twins. Some identical twins, who have been adopted by dif-



ferent families and kept miles apart in childhood, seem to have striking similarities in adult life. Conversely, the detailed study of many other identical twins brought up in the same family have revealed pairs of adult twins with quite different personalities, temperaments, outlooks, interests and behaviours. Yet they clearly have identical genes, and obviously the same parents and the same schools and upbringing.

In fact, many connections between genes and personal characteristics are weak, leaving lots unexplained. Moreover, it is notoriously difficult to separate genetic effects from environmental influences: this is sometimes called the 'nature versus nurture debate'.

However, the current view is that our genes lay out a set of possibilities with limits on what we can become. They provide a set of options. But the life experiences that we then have determine what we actually become. So nowadays, rather than believing that we are completely programmed by our

genes, scientists believe that for many of our characteristics our environment is at least as influential as our genes.

It seems therefore that we may not have complete freedom in the way we behave. But we do have choices and partial freedom within the constraints of our genes. We can respond to reasoning. We can exercise self-control and this can be strengthened or weakened. While it may be difficult to change a core personality trait, it is accepted that with effort we can change our behaviour. Genetic make-up is not a defence in a criminal court.

Bible 'Genetics'

Science and the Bible agree that both nature (genetics) and nurture (environment) affect our behaviour. Scientific thought has changed, but the Bible is clear and consistent. There is one thing that we most definitely inherit from our parents, and it is a fatal condition. As members of the human race we are descendants of Adam and so are destined to die. We inherit mortality: whether we live a long or a short life eventually we all cease to exist:

For since by man came death, by man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive (1 Corinthians 15:21–22).

Quite obviously, Sally's daughter was not responsible for her genetic make-up. Nonetheless Sally thought that her daughter should modify her behaviour. Similarly, we are not to blame personally for having human nature.

We all naturally have thoughts and desires in our minds, but the problem is that these can and often do become sinful:

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death (James 1:13–15).

God does hold us responsible for our actions (see Ezekiel 33:12–20), and we read that sin leads to death:

The soul who sins shall die (Ezekiel 18:4).

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23).

We are all prone to do wrong things, and it is often an internal fight to do what we believe is right. The apostle Paul described this battle, acknowledging that he could not win it by himself (read Romans 7:15–25). Furthermore, we also need to know what is 'right', and this is where the Word of God is essential. The Bible is like no other book – it is the words of God Himself. So it can show us the right way to try to think and to behave (Psalm 119:97–104). Jesus said that his words were life-giving:

It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life (John 6:63).

Overcoming Our Nature

He also told us that we should not simply follow what the majority of people do in life (Matthew 7:13). The apostles urged believers to change

their thinking to God's way of thinking. Paul wrote:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God (Romans 12:2).

The apostles told believers to think on spiritually beneficial things (see Philippians 4:8), and stressed the saving power of God's word:

Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever, because 'All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the Lord endures forever.' Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you (1 Peter 1:22–25). See also Acts 20:32, Romans 1:16, 2 Timothy 3:15.

Our environment can affect the way we think and this in turn can influence the way we behave. Sally's daughter had probably seen her mother lose her temper, and copied her. We too are influenced by people we love and with whom we spend time. Bible truth enlightens the mind and helps us to move more towards thinking like God, although this is never fully possible in our mortal state (Isaiah 55:8–9). We need to avoid bad influences:

Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you

learned, and avoid them (Romans 16:17, and also 1 Timothy 6:20–21).

By choosing spiritually healthy environments we can nurture more godly attitudes and behaviours, and reactions to the way we are, as God asks of us.

It is Our Choice

We are in a serious plight, being by nature 'desperately wicked' (Jeremiah 17:9). Despite this God has offered us eternal life if we turn to Him.

We... preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them (Acts 14:15).



We cannot help how we start off, but by God's grace and with the help of His Word we can influence how we turn out. The choice is ours, and we must accept personal responsibility for whether we accept or reject God's offer. There is no one and nothing else to blame.

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