



# STRANGER

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*in the* NEST

*Do Parents Really Shape  
Their Child's Personality,  
Intelligence, or Character?*

DAVID B. COHEN



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For her cherished love, enduring friendship, and wise counsel, I dedicate this book to my dear wife Leslie, and in deepest affection and gratitude offer her a timeless valentine that evokes something of the spirit of our relationship and the message of my work.

*If Fate is just a roll of nature's dice  
And happenstance is Fortune's main device,  
Then love is blind, and mere caprice explains  
Why romance comes with all its joys and pains.*

*But surely there is more to love than this:  
When cupid's wound and Eros' artifice  
Ignite two hearts with passions set in time  
And merge two souls whose dreams are set to rhyme.*

*Since genes turn out to play a vital role  
In how we sort in ways of heart and soul,  
It means that instinct shapes our destiny  
Though how this works is still a mystery.*

*And yet the sociobiologists  
And biological psychologists  
Admit that mental life is just as real,  
That how we act will come from how we feel.*

*As feelings pushed by nature's inner dance  
Compete with feelings pulled by circumstance,  
The push and pull will merge like hand in glove  
When past and future blend in deepest love.*

*I have made a dream poem of humanity. . . . I have taken stock. I will remember. . . . Deep into the snow mountains my search has led me. Now I have it fast. My dream has given it to me, in utter clearness, that I may know it forever.*

—Thomas Mann

# Acknowledgments

The ideal book,” said the Roman poet Horace, “is that which at the same time instructs and entertains. . . . Avoid words that are new, obsolete, or sesquipedalian—foot-and-a-half words. Be as brief as clarity allows. Go straight to the heart of the matter . . . erase almost as much as you write. . . .” Horace also advised, “submit your work to a competent critic, and beware of your friends.” I have tried to follow all this advice except, I must admit, the last injunction. For not only did I consult many competent critics, both laymen and professional, I failed to cultivate wariness of friends—a wise decision, for my friends, like so many others, have been an inspiration.

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# Introduction

*Great ideas often seem simple and self-evident, but only after somebody has explained them to us. Then, how interesting they become!*

—Theodosius Dobzhansky

I was barely a toddler when my father began taking me for walks on Ocean Parkway. A few blocks from our apartment house the street gently rose over a pair of tracks, allowing free passage underneath for the lumbering freight trains of the Long Island railroad as they snaked through Brooklyn. My father would hold me firmly, patiently, just above an iron barrier from whose vantage I could see undulating cars that would disappear or emerge below us.

I loved the weekend ritual, taking walks and watching from our side of the street to see what he called the “Saturday train,” and on the next day crossing to the other side of the parkway to see the “Sunday train.” It didn’t matter that they were the same trains, coming and going, viewed from either side of the street because each was a distinct experience separated in time and space by crossing over the wide and busy roadway, a journey not to be taken lightly by a 2-year-old.

Ocean Parkway was an eight-lane boulevard lined with rows of magnificent maples and sycamores that in some places met in the center to form a leafy canopy. Our apartment building was separated from buildings on the far side, not only by the great distance and natural obstructions, but by man-made divisions. These began on our side with a single-lane service road, after which came a bridle path and six traffic-filled lanes of main thoroughfare. Beyond were a bicycle path and sidewalk with benches, followed by a service lane at the far side. During my childhood, I rarely ventured beyond the bike path to the Sunday side.

The Saturday side was the boundary that marked my territory, where I lived and played and, for the briefest time, watched the trains. Now there

is only silence with a trashy clutter of weeds and litter that marks the rusting tracks, giving the scene a melancholy quality. Thus mocked, old memories of sunny days and noisy trains nevertheless coalesce around an idea about the two sides of that street overlooking the tracks, not as they were but as a metaphor for two ways of looking at human behavior: one familiar, the other less so yet more intriguing. And another thought: We can stick to familiar territory or we can venture out and explore new ground.

## Saturday Side: The Siren Song of Nurture's Sway

The *Saturday perspective*, the most familiar and popular, favors social explanations. To understand personality, think of it as shaped mostly from the outside by family life. To understand mental illness, think about dysfunctional parenting and stressful social situations. The *Sunday perspective*—less familiar territory—favors biological explanations. To understand personality, think of it as developing mostly from inborn influences. To understand mental illness, think of aberrant genes and harmful prenatal conditions.

Both views are true enough, for each focuses on inescapable facts of life. Clearly, Saturday people must accept evidence of inborn influences, just as Sunday people accept evidence of social influences. Yet most of us seem to live on the Saturday side, preferring environmental assumptions that people can be changed for the better, that inconvenient or embarrassing differences between them can be eliminated through encouragement or training, and that, through supportive social environments, one can create a happier world. But the downside to this environmentalist perspective is that if humane influences can bring relief, totalitarian influences can bring harm. If individuals are pliable clay to be shaped by external forces, parental as well as political, how does this serve their best interest, and how can they claim to have free will?

Academics, sociologists in particular, often push the environmentalist view while actively denying all but the most obvious genetic influence. Genetic influence in Alzheimer's, Down's syndrome, and maybe even in some mental illnesses is generally accepted, but not in personality and intelligence, and not in attitudes and achievement. College students, too, assume the overriding power of nurture, as evident when they are asked to rate the following 10 statements as mostly true or mostly false:

1. Most mental illness is caused by dysfunctional parenting or by stressful social conditions.
2. Abused children most likely will become abusive parents.
3. Genetically determined behaviors are mostly unchangeable.
4. The longer spouses live together, the more they resemble one another psychologically.
5. Children praised for extraordinary performance usually perform even better the next time.
6. Children of low-intelligence mothers generally wind up with comparably low intelligence.
7. Adults who were reared in adoptive homes are, in their personality and intelligence, more similar to their adoptive siblings than to strangers in the community.
8. Children learn language mostly by instruction and by imitating their parents.
9. Family resemblance in personality and intelligence comes mostly from family members living together in a shared environment.
10. Genetic influence on intelligence gets weaker as individuals get older and accumulate experience in their environments.

On the surface, each of these 10 statements may seem true enough, even self-evident. When asked to decide, students typically find most of these statements reasonable, with 80 percent rating one or more of them as true, and over 50 percent subscribing to a majority of these items. Yet all 10 are mostly if not entirely false, which raises a provocative question: What should one make of a perspective that lends credence to such erroneous statements?

It is not just academic types who seem captivated by social explanations for psychological traits, but also the media. An article in *Reader's Digest* recommended various instructional tasks with young children—for example, look them in the eye, cheer when they learn to drink from a cup, talk to them more often—all this not just to make them happy and secure but to help raise their IQ. There is a desperate quality to this vision of nurture triumphant, as evident in the conflict between the title of the article (“You Can Raise Your Child’s IQ”) and the first sentence of the concluding paragraph that begins: “Actual IQ scores may not change. . . .” The argument supporting the influence of nurture is shadowed by the inconclusive evidence.

It is not just academics and reporters, but parents who invest in educational boosters: developmental toys for toddlers, flash cards for preschool-

ers, and special classes or lessons for older children. Such investments have fewer cognitive or vocational payoffs than emotional and social consequences. As expressions of love, however, they can strengthen emotional ties between parents and children, but as expressions of parental power, they can distort or weaken those ties. The belief that parents have more influence than is true—or worse, the belief that they *should* have such influence—makes it possible to rationalize intrusive, restrictive, or overcontrolling behavior, to assume that children can be molded to fulfill parents' fondest hopes and greatest expectations, whether that means being like them or even better. But what about all those children who cannot be either?

## Sunday Side: The Remedy of Nature's Ways

Surely one needs no reminding that loving and stimulating environments can have salutary effects, and that abusive or neglectful parenting can leave psychological scars. Why, then, do these effects so often *not* occur or fail to last—why, for example, do most abused children not become abusive parents, while some well-loved children grow up to be monsters? And what about the ugly-duckling child who becomes a swan or the caterpillar child who becomes a butterfly—or that lively child who becomes a melancholy adult, that talented child who proves a failure, or that well-behaved child who winds up stealing cars, writing hot checks, and exploiting people? The inescapable answer is that, if sufficiently strong, inborn potentials can trump parental influence by manifesting in such unexpected and uncontrollable ways that one's child may seem like a perfect stranger.

The power of inborn potential to limit parental influence is evident in anomalous development and in two startling research findings on personality and intelligence: Identical twins reared apart are nevertheless remarkably alike, as if they had been reared together, yet genetically unrelated people reared together are nevertheless remarkably unlike, as if they had been reared apart. These two findings are really quite revolutionary, for they threaten to overturn much of what the Saturday, or nurture, crowd has long assumed.

What, then, are the benefits of exploring the Sunday side of the nature–nurture debate as it applies to parental influence? One benefit is that we discover many interesting things—for example, bright children usually have less bright parents; schizophrenia has nothing to do with par-

enting; identical twins can't be identical. Exploring the nature–nurture debate also helps us understand why those 10 items that many people think are true, aren't. We also get to appreciate something else, something central to the thesis of this book: that while parenting is essential to psychological development, just as food is essential to physical development, a *particular kind* of parenting may matter hardly at all—at least for some traits.

Is it possible, as one psychologist asserts, that “children would develop into the same sort of adults if we left them in their homes, their schools, their neighborhoods, and their cultural or subcultural groups, but switched all the parents around”? Recoiling from the implications, one woman countered: “I find myself having trouble accepting this, not because I think it might be false, but because I suspect it might be true. The idea that my neighbor could do just as good a job raising my children as I could do is offensive to me, but why? In some ways it is liberating (as a parent, it's good to know I shouldn't screw up too badly), but in some ways it is threatening (my children should *need me*). I guess it comes down to: Why do parents feel so invested in their children if in fact the children don't need them very much—‘them’ specifically—if just anyone could raise just any child?”

The point is not to deny the importance of family attachments and the power of social influence, but to see where parenting effects are weakest and what all this means for us. The proposed exploration can bring comfort, for example, to adoptive parents whose high expectations and great capacity to love were doomed by an adoptive child whose antisocial personality made him a stranger in the nest, and whose antisocial behavior transformed a happy family into a dysfunctional household.

These parents can readily accept a biological solution—that antisocial traits are highly heritable—if only because they sense that good old-fashioned efforts at self-control and character-building simply haven't worked and that conventional social explanations don't seem to apply. These parents can readily identify with the poignant imagery offered by Samuel Butler in his novel *Erewhon*:

*Imagine what it must be to have [a child], who is of an entirely different temperament and disposition to your own; nay, half a dozen such, who will not love you though you have stinted yourself in a thousand ways to provide for their comfort and well-being—who will forget all your self-sacrifice, and of whom you may never be sure that they are not bearing a grudge against you for errors of judgment into which you may have fallen, though you had hoped that such*

*had been long since atoned for. Ingratitude such as this is not uncommon, yet fancy what it must be to bear! It is hard upon the duckling to have been hatched by a hen, but is it not also hard upon the hen to have hatched the duckling?*

Parents need to understand the futility of guilt over their supposed failures or anger over *their* parents' supposed failures. Also, they must understand that despite the best parenting and family life, a child can still grow up to be vulnerable, irresponsible, moody, unambitious, or even suicidal. Likewise, despite the worst parenting and family life, a child can still grow up to be resilient, responsible, secure, ambitious, and optimistic. Parents can help a sensitive child to be more secure, a hyperactive child to be more self-controlled, even a talented child to be more fulfilled—but only when the biological imperative underlying these traits isn't so great as to counteract the effort to persuade and instruct.

How great, then, is the rearing effect when a child matures into a young adult and the parents are increasingly out of the picture? Overestimating the strength, duration, and direction of parental influence—assuming it is strong, lasting, and predictable—means ignoring not just everyday experience but striking evidence to the contrary, all of which raises the question of parental responsibility.

## Who Is Responsible?

In triumph or failure, the question's the same: Who gets the credit and who gets the blame? The popular social-science answer—parents—is as harmful as it is misleading for promoting the illusion that parenting has the paramount influence and therefore responsibility for a child's personality, intelligence, and character. Also, it engenders in the solicitous, child-centered parent an unrealistic sense of responsibility and destructive feelings of guilt over a wayward or mentally ill child, while it engenders in the willful, self-centered parent a nagging disappointment or even a sense of betrayal when, for example, a child groomed for the family business becomes an artist or a professor.

Then how should we take the comment by archbehaviorist John B. Watson, who in 1924 offered this now notorious bit of bravado: "Give me a dozen healthy infants and my own specified world to bring them up in and I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select—doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief

and, yes, even beggar-man and thief. . . ." Watson believed he could do this, as he said, "regardless of [the child's] talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors."

Watson wasn't denying inborn dispositions, just their power. Yet Watson's claims were extreme and, given the absence of factual support, oversimplified and naive. He did not understand that what children learn, what children *become*, need not follow what parents strive to teach them—that their psychological development, whether normal or abnormal, ordinary or extraordinary, would be full of surprises even if parents achieved total control over their educational environment.

Over the years, however, Watson's influential view was reincarnated in an assumption that even severe mental illnesses originate in defective rearing. For decades, psychologists, social workers, and educators have convinced millions of parents of their primary responsibility for determining a child's destiny, as if a child were so much malleable clay. Millions of mothers and fathers have internalized this message with a consequently deep sense of responsibility for things gone wrong. This readiness to internalize reflects a powerful disposition to see family life as having paramount control over a child's psychological development. Most people feel a warm nostalgia about their childhood; others feel anger and resentment. Such deep and abiding sentiments often arise from years of shared experience and the commonly held belief that what one has become must have depended mightily on how one was reared.

Then how is it that extraordinary children can come from ordinary parents, ordinary children from extraordinary parents? Why, despite years of shared experience, can family members be so different in intelligence, personality, and other psychological traits, as if strangers in a nest? How come decent, well-adjusted parents can have neurotic or nasty children, while neurotic or nasty parents can have decent, well-adjusted children? And why do life events so often confound expectations, fears, or hopes as they frustrate efforts to make things happen a certain way?

Such indispensable questions can be answered only by acknowledging evidence that parents have much less influence on a child's psychological development than is commonly assumed. Without parents, we could never have been, but with our own *or any other* parents, could we have been otherwise? And to the extent that the answer is no, then the notion that parental influence determined our development is more illusory than realistic.



## Chapter One

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### Within the Nest

*The gods were once disputing whether it was possible for a living being to change its nature. Jupiter said “yes,” but Venus said, “no.” So to try the question, Jupiter turned a cat into a maiden and gave her to a young man for a wife. The wedding was duly performed and the young couple sat down to the wedding-feast. “See,” said Jupiter to Venus, “how becomingly she behaves. Who could tell that yesterday she was but a cat? Surely her nature is changed.”*

*“Wait a minute,” replied Venus, and let loose a mouse in the room. No sooner did the bride see this than she jumped up from her seat and tried to pounce upon the mouse. “Ah, you see,” said Venus, “nature will out.”*

—Aesop of Samos

Many people resist the Sunday perspective (see Introduction), which is understandable, given that biological mechanisms often can't easily be seen, felt, or imagined. They aren't personal in that they can't easily be seen as relevant to the self. They aren't social, for they don't offer the familiar characters of family and community that we can readily cast in stories of good guys and bad guys, perpetrators and victims. And they don't seem remediable as an educational problem to be solved socially. Lacking these personally satisfying qualities, biological mechanisms are at a disadvantage. Also, they discomfort us by suggesting that much of what we care about is out of our control.

Nevertheless, others are not strictly pronature or pronurture, assuming quite rightly that nature as well as nurture affects personality. As a result, the debate would seem to be over, the controversy resolved, and therefore, so what? But the more interesting question is rather *how much* does biology constrain rearing? And beyond the question of how much is it nature,