

# The Mysteries of Who We Are

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*Version 1.4 (posted on 26 May 2020)*  
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Are people *born* to be who they are, or do we *become* who we are?

I have a dear friend, one of a number of friends I've known for almost half a century. This particular friend had a career for 30-some years as a social worker and is now retired. We get together every week for lunch, although these days that means sitting six feet apart on my front porch rather than going to a restaurant.

My friend often regales me with stories from her days of social work, stories about the sad and difficult lives of her many clients. She relates these stories with equanimity, relative good humor, and a remarkable lack of judgment about the peccadilloes of her clients, their sometimes desperate predicaments and attempts to justify the situations (which seemingly they often created) with odd beliefs and magical thinking about how they got into those circumstances. Social disadvantage and self-delusion are typical subtexts within these tales.

Just as often, my friend shares information about our mutual longstanding friends — news she's heard from or about them concerning their lives now, which leads to anecdotes from our shared social past involving these friends. She does this in a way that isn't overly sentimental, but contains longstanding affection and a certain respect for the durability of such friendships, as well as wry appreciation for life's panoramic weirdness.

Sometimes I interrupt to ask my friend how these clients of hers and friends of ours came to be the way they were. Invariably, she invokes childhood conditioning and early life-experiences as primary causal and shaping factors in their development. You know, family stuff. She does so without batting an eye, as if those reasons are indisputable and obvious.

That's where things get strange for me, and they get strange because I'm an astrologer. I have the natal charts of most people I've ever known. Although I don't memorize every chart I draw up for clients or friends — the symbolic data from 35,000 charts is not something I want to keep in my head, so I've trained myself not to remember most of them. Still, it's unavoidable that some charts will

end up stored in my memory banks, especially those of clients I've dealt with often over many years of session work and people I like or love from my personal life.

The stories my friend tells me about her clients and our mutual friends always highlight certain facets of personality — behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, etc. — essentially as recurring themes. As I listen to the stories about people whose charts I know, at least in a general thematic way — I always think, "*Well that paradox, tendency, challenge, conflict (whatever) is right there in the chart, plain as day.*"

And yet, when I ask where that comes from, the response (and not just from my friend the storyteller; no, this happens with most everyone) is childhood conditioning and early life experience. To these, we can add two further factors: social relationships and cultural pressures.

If that's true, then why does the birth chart — which *predates* childhood conditioning or early experience — show the same thing?

I'm not suggesting that childhood conditioning plays no role in determining who we become, but if a similar indication comes *before* that, then assuming the conditioning to be "*the cause or explanation*" must necessarily be bogus.

And so, for me at least, the whole sticky question in psychology of "nature or nurture" arises again. Hereditary factors are clearly tied to physical traits, but what about personality and social behavior? Is that a function of environmental variables more than heredity? For a long time, nature held sway in the debate. Eugenics — a world-wide movement in the early 20th century that was, among other things, a benchmark of Nazi master race ideology, as well as the underpinning of white supremacy — chalked up everything to nature. People were like horses and could be bred to emphasize certain traits.

By the time I went to high school (in the mid-1960s), however, the tide had turned — in part, I think, because the horror of World War II was still fresh in so many American minds — and nurture emerged as the presumptive winner of the debate. Environmental conditioning, more than inherited genes, gained traction as the primary formative factor in shaping people to be the way they were. Later, though, over the ensuing decades, and particularly through advances in neuroscience, nature made something of a comeback.

Now the debate has shifted from the either-or context to study the interaction of these very different forces. The current paradigm in psychology is that both factors are potent. We might say that heredity provides the basic structure, but environment determines or fills in the content. Genetics are now understood as

profoundly complex and variable. Experience provides triggers that may turn on expressions of some genes and turn off other expressions, effectively selecting which traits develop. This newer understanding of nature-nurture is called Epigenetics.

But back to astrology. Obviously, the most fundamental presumption of natal astrology, which links lifetime personality to the single time-space moment of physical birth (more technically, first breath), leans toward nature. But astrology is also about cycles activating over time, and that adds a significant element of nurture.

My understanding after half a century of astrological study and practice is that natal charts reveal the enduring themes and challenges of the particular lives they symbolize. Humans embody a rich but limited set of stories, and the elements of these stories are often paradoxical. For instance, security and freedom are basic human motivations that everyone shares to one degree or another, and in many shapes or directions. We want both (to be secure and free), and we can't really have one without some of the other, but they tend to be mutually exclusive. Natal charts are brilliant at accurately defining for each individual which overall themes are more central, and which are peripheral. It also highlights the paradoxes within each theme. What charts don't (and cannot) do is identify the precise form those themes will take in the life of the person.

In addition, charts themselves don't give any indication of where such themes might have come from. In other words, charts don't reveal *why* we are who we are. I have no doubt that some astrologers disagree with me about this, perhaps vehemently. They'll point to the Moon, Saturn, 12th house, and south node as symbols of what developed in the past, but that kind of "past" is different from the broad filters of soul continuity or past lives. Such metaphysical orientations come from the astrologer, not from the chart itself. Heck, in my opinion charts reveal little if anything about the native's consciousness. They're about structure much more than content. Charts won't tell us whether a given person is attentive, learning as they go, and maturing or just sleepwalking unconsciously through an unexamined life.

I regard it as profoundly difficult — if not impossible — for any of these schemes in astrology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, or even philosophy to nail down the primary causes or reasons for why we are who we are. Neurobiology probably comes closest, but even that involves moving targets that shape-shift and change in our understanding over time. Attempting to pinpoint ultimate reasons or causes seems to me guaranteed to result in springing the mousetrap of false certainty. The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves may be compelling — I do that for a living — but ultimately, who we are, where we came from, and how we became ourselves remain mysteries.

Among the many challenges of spirituality and/or human maturity is honoring the admonition concerning the examination of our own lives or of life in general to stop short before thinking, feeling, or believing that we have found *The Answer*. Doing that well (meaning stopping short) enhances our humility. Ignoring it amplifies our foolhardy arrogance.

Failing to rise to that challenge and settling instead for ego-comforting but patently false certainties has gotten humanity into a lot of damned trouble — in every way, and at every conceivable level of human life, from the personal, through the interpersonal, to the collective. I'm not suggesting that opinions are bad or that all judgments are wrong. What I'm lobbying for is that we think twice before casting our opinions and judgments in stone as certainties.

Given our apparently insatiable need to flee doubt or ambivalence, I don't see how we can avoid falling into that trap, at least sometimes. My fondest hope is that we might quickly recognize our folly and climb out of the pit.

One might presume that people who are faith-based would do better with this, since they are inclined toward magic and mystery, but religious fundamentalists are frequently the most dogmatic of us all, clinging fiercely to unfounded certainties. Conversely, some secular technologists are almost as stubborn in asserting "scientific" certainty as if that were cut-and-dried. Then there's the public. In this age of social media echo chambers, many people accept as gospel whatever they see or hear online, as long as it reinforces their own leanings.

Religion, science, and popular culture aside, though, it sure as hell doesn't appear that collective humanity will embrace uncertainty with modesty and grace any time soon. As a species, we seem to prefer false certainty.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that reality is not merely messy, slippery, and immensely complicated, it's also irreducible and downright mysterious. Getting to the truth about anything is delicate and fraught with deception.

*If you see the Buddha on the road, kill him, for he's not the Buddha.*