

Nature vs. Nurture
Matt Ridley

Very articulate. Great explanation of "The 4th dimension"

The fourth dimension being time. Genes are turned on and off, sometimes multiple times, over the course of one's lifetime. A given gene may do different things at different developmental times, as well as different things to different parts of a developing body. This, explains Ridley, explains why a parsimonious 30,000 genes can manage the creation of an organism as complex as a human being.

To support his argument that we are equally products of "nature and nurture," and that therefore Galton's century-old dichotomy is a false one, Ridley has to stretch a bit on the "nurture" side. He lumps under "nurture" everything that is not strictly genetic. To wit, the reaction in a mother's body to her third or fourth pregnancy with a boy. These younger brothers are slightly more likely to be born weighing less, and to be homosexual, than their older brothers. The mother's body has more experience fighting with a male foetus for who gets to decide on the placental blood chemistry. This isn't exactly in the genes, but on the other hand it is not the kind of nurture over which anybody has conscious control.

The bottom line is that culture and genetics seem to coevolve, and there is a tremendous amount of variation among individual people and considerable systematic variation among human groups. It makes sense to talk of genes affecting a predisposition to certain kinds of behavior... alcoholism, aggressiveness and whatever. However it is only very rare that a single gene can be associated with a single trait, physical or behavioral, and environment plays a major role in the traits of any individual.