No Two Alike
Judith Rich Harris

A robust theory of the systems of the mind explains the other 55% of personality

Judith Rich Harris has devised a solution to the second half of the puzzle she set herself a decade ago. John Locke proposed three centuries ago that a baby enters the world as a blank slate, tabula rasa in Latin, upon which worldly experience writes, and in doing so forms the adult. Per Harris' title, each of us is quite unique. The process by which we attain our uniqueness has occupied philosophers and scientists for centuries.

I begin with a caution to the reader. Do not search your mental library for a template to pre-apply to Harris' book. You don't have one. It is not Nature vs. Nurture redux. Not genetic determinism. This is a fresh assemblage of ideas, pulled together from a number of realms of contemporary science, to be approached with a fresh and open mind.

The history of the science upon which she draws is full of strong personalities and opinions, drawing on and shaping the intellectual currents of their times: Galton, with his belief that human ability and character were inherited; Skinner and Watson, who believed in the potency of environmental interventions and the malleability of human nature (a belief shared by generations of educators). This is the baggage Harris asks you to throw aside. Neither Galton's nor Skinner's model comes close to explaining human nature as we experience it. What, then, does?

45% of individual differences - Harris focuses on personality, but other researchers find it to be true of other traits such as cognitive ability - are inherited. This was one of the principal arguments of Harris' 1998 "The Nurture Assumption." The second major argument concerned what did not account for the other 55%. After controlling for genetics, parents' influence on children's personalities, language and values is minimal. These are testable hypothesis: simply look at twins raised together and apart, and blood siblings vs. adoptive siblings under the same roof. The book posed a serious threat to the dominant model. It exculpated generations from the parental guilt imposed by Freud and his followers, and challenged parents' and educators' sense of their own importance in forming a child. Harris got into some nasty academic mudslinging, and takes delicious pleasure in recounting her victories in "No Two Alike." It is exactly the kind of gossip upon which humankind, per her thesis, thrives, and I relished it.

That still leaves 55% of the variance in human personality unaccounted for. What are the culprits? Harris crafted the book like a mystery novel, lining up the usual suspects one by one and dismissing them: (1) home environments, (2) child rearing practices, (3) gene-environment interactions, (4) birth order, and (5) gene-environment correlations. 1,2 and 4 are self-evident. Concepts (3) and (5) take some understanding of genetics and statistics. (3) might say that an environmental factor - harsh discipline, say -

might make tall children less aggressive and short children more aggressive, with the result that on average there is no effect. (5) would posit that individuals who love to cheer would naturally gravitate towards an environment where they can do so, such as sports. But in the end none of these hypotheses hold water. They do not account for any meaningful fraction of human personality differences. Now for what does!

Three things: Our

o Relationship system

o Socialization system, and

o Status system

The first question Harris must address is, exactly what are these? These terms were not found in the Nature-vs-Nurture discussion. She draws extensively on recent science, especially Stephen Pinker's "How the Mind Works" and "The Language Instinct." Pinker's driving insight is that far from being a tabula rasa, the brain is extensively prewired for the tasks of vision, speech, hearing, manipulation of the hands and the other functions that make us human. Researchers have the ability to see which areas of the brain "light up" in each function.

Harris' hypothesis is that we have evolved to be born prewired with mental systems for the most important social functions in primate society. Our relationship system is a mental Rolodex of individuals, with slots for name, face, abilities, personality traits and every other feature that is important for us to know in maintaining relationships. Newborns immediately start to populate their Rolodexes with a who's who of voices, smells and expectations.

We are social animals. We need to belong. The socialization system fits us into groups. We observe groups, abstract the traits of members of the group into a stereotype, and attempt to mold our behavior to that stereotype. A boy playing baseball does what kids playing baseball do: toss the ball back and forth, take play swings, and talk the talk. A kid who doesn't, like Hobbes' friend Calvin, is acutely aware of being an outsider. Each of us belongs to a great many groups. Harris points out the fallacy of the "nurture assumption" that the family group is the major influence on a child. Wrong - the kid can be a totally different person at home, in school, at summer camp, and on a team. As parents often hear.

Status, the third system, operates in dynamic tension with socialization. We conform to groups, but we each occupy a unique niche within the group pecking order. The higher our status, the more social goodies we enjoy: material stuff, mating opportunities, company and leisure. After striving for acceptance by the baseball team, we compete for the position of captain, pitcher and other prestigious positions.

Harris closes by admitting that her theory is complex and that testing it will involve monumental challenges. To what degree are the three constructs independent of one another? How does one observe and measure things like relationships or status to subject them to statistical analysis? What alternative, derivative or simplified theories might equally well explain what we observe? These issues will be a long time in the resolution, but whatever the outcome, Harris' will be remembered as the one who framed the right question.