Dear Friends and Colleagues,


--Jay Joseph

What are the forces shaping who we are, how we live, and how we act? Are we shaped primarily by our environment, or by our genes? These very old questions form the basis of the "nature-nurture" debate. Increasingly, we are told that research has confirmed the importance of genetic factors influencing psychiatric disorders, personality, intelligence, criminality, and so forth.

Jay Joseph's timely, challenging book provides a much needed critical appraisal of the evidence cited in support of genetic theories in psychiatry and psychology. His book shows that, far from establishing the importance of genes, family, twin and adoption research has been plagued by researcher bias, unsound methodology, and a reliance on unsupported theoretical assumptions. Historically speaking, he shows how this greatly flawed body of research has been used in support of eugenics and conservative social agendas. This is particularly evident in Chapter Two, which contains the only in-depth critical review of the history of twin research ever published.

Much of the purported scientific evidence put forward in support of genetic theories has been produced by the fields of behavior genetics and psychiatric genetics. It has been delivered to the public in numerous magazine and newspaper articles, as well as by the authors of several popular books. In particular, studies of twins (both reared-together and reared-apart) have been put forward as providing conclusive evidence in support of genetic influences on psychological traits such as intelligence and personality. The reared-apart twin studies performed by researchers at the University of Minnesota have been the subject of much attention, including stories of individual pairs of supposedly reared-apart identical twins who, it was claimed, displayed remarkable similarities upon being reunited. Joseph shows, however, that both systematic reared-apart twin studies and stories about individual pairs provide little (if any) evidence in support of genetic influences on human behavioral differences.
Schizophrenia is the most studied, and at the same time the most feared and misunderstood, of all psychiatric disorders. Two chapters are devoted to problems with genetic research in this area. One of these chapters reviews schizophrenia adoption research, which includes the frequently cited Danish-American and Finnish investigations. Another chapter looks into the alleged genetic basis of criminal behavior, an idea more popular today than at any time in the past 50 years. Additional chapters look into the genetics of IQ, the heritability concept, and molecular genetic research.

The bleak view of humans and their future put forward by the proponents of genetic determinism is based largely on the faulty research Joseph highlights in this book. He concludes that there is little evidence that disordered genes are the cause of human suffering and socially disapproved behavior. Rather, the likely causes are well-documented psychologically harmful events and environments.

The Gene Illusion is essential reading for anyone seeking an alternative to the increasingly popular, yet mistaken view that "genes are destiny."

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