

A Christian Father's Assessment of Negating Ancestral Sin Through Parenting

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Introduction

A crime in the final analysis remains inexplicable inasmuch as it cannot be fully traced back to biological, psychological and/or sociological factors. Totally explaining one's crime would be tantamount to explaining away his or her guilt and to seeing in him or her not a free and responsible human being but a machine to be repaired.

(Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, p. 149)

At the point of writing, I am a father of two girls, a fresh teenager and a pre-teen.

Amongst the myriad of reasons for documenting this part of my parenting journey, fulfilment and accountability are perhaps the most pronounced. Fatherhood has been a delight, but of late an inexplicable sense of anxiety and inadequacy lurks in my mind. I concede that I am still in the midst of figuring out and it is for the hope of avoiding potential parental pitfalls that compels me to write this account, which I endeavour to temper as crystallising thoughts, not discoveries. Why this topic? Because ancestral sin is *visible* through heredity and should rank the same as issues on gender, climate change, poverty, weapons of mass destruction, and world peace, as the root of them all is humankind; because we seem to be drawn into a bad cycle of cause and effect yet we appear aloof; because I believe the influence of nuclear family to be a determiner of one's fate, and because out from every ethics class emerge those

who will choose to live justly and those who choose to lead immoral lives. We have real-world exemplars when teaching our children consequences of individual action, but we are bankrupt in educating them on causes. Consequences of individual action are easy to teach because they are tangible. Causes are not. If we have the means at our disposal to avert a genetic disaster; if the effects of ancestral sin can be diminished or nullified, and if parenting is the basic dynamic of child-rearing, what more direct and decisive way is there than for parents to be more able in raising their children?

What This Is and Isn't

In many ways the opening quote in this essay sets the tone of my inquiry: some of life's mysteries are withheld from us so there can be meaning to freewill, that is, whether we believe that life is purposeful or just an elaborate play dictated by higher powers, whether we choose to cope with dismay and suffering or decide that all is futile, or whether our intellectual expeditions reveal hope or despair in controlling our destinies. Before I mislead you into thinking that some grand philosophising is in store, allow me to disclaim any attempt to answer deeply problematic questions or charm anyone into taking my stance. The conundrums this topic can pose such as divine intervention, human autonomy, nature and nurture, and ethics are for far cleverer minds to solve. My only wish is for a more robust opinion, through testing and sifting already existing ideas, including that of my own. I present my views in this essay in a straightforward manner as upheld by my faith, lived experiences, and science, all of which are indispensable if the aim was for an impartial conclusion. However, I avoid the overexertion from surveying voluminous literature and discussing concepts at length, and I will not bog my readers down with citations. Instead, I envision this piece of writing to be a condensation of my musings as a keen parent and invite you to investigate independently on your own. Here specialists will warn me against eisegesis and assumptions, but I have no special allegiance to any of the three views.

My evaluation of this topic is not infallible or authoritative. For the benefit of parents and parents-to-be, it conversely welcomes critical correction and revision like how we now know it is possible that the earth is older than six thousand years; that creation could really have been completed in a week; that the teenage brain is designed to be more sensitive and thus emotional; that permissive parents do not necessarily nurture children with high self-esteem. Finally, as I have read broadly on the topic and have devoted my energies to raising my children for over a decade, I have much to contemplate, and will leave the lion's share of the work to reflection instead of scholarly consensus.

The Problem

The Christian Bible, with its austere teachings on ancestral sin, illustrates a reality unfree from consequences of transgressions but strangely abdicates from providing *rational* solutions. This could be construed as a bad joke if I weren't a Christian. The secular world of humanists and skeptics repudiates the spiritual element yet maintains that man is controlled by forces outside himself, suggesting through all sorts of thorny concepts that it is best for man to relinquish his belief in freedom and self-determination. Current science, despite borrowing heavily from specialised branches of knowledge such as psychology and DNA studies (I am being very selective)—none of which I can claim to have mastered even tiny bits of—reduces the issue to genetic ailment. Such a diagnosis seems not only narrow but dangerously self-absorbed. Nevertheless, to avoid going too deep into the scholastic rabbit hole, I will make my case through a distillation of three personally meaningful sources of information—Christianity, my lived experiences, and science. The issue of parenting will be a recurring motif as it is my hope that those interested in this topic will see merit in this essay or at least find something new worth pursuing.

So, which of the three is the beacon of truth, or is there some middle ground? Perhaps a triangulation of all three to expose a blind spot? As a Christian parent with a contemporary

concern for *practical, actionable ways* to negate the dangers of ancestral sin, is there an unambiguous *modus operandi* (not merely an ideology) that integrates—whether it be loosely—these three ways of thinking? Can I, through parenting, sever the iniquities of my ancestors, and raise my children to be without the ills of their father and forefathers?

Understanding Ancestral Sin

[Adam's sin] had consequences for all humankind: mortality, the loss of godlikeness, and the dissemination of a tendency to sin being chief among them.
(DuPont, A., *Signs of an Augustinian Original Sin in Milan?*)

As doctrine, ancestral sin, generational curse, and intergenerational sin are by and large synonymous, sternly propagated by religion, teachers of philosophy, and sectarians as “the sin of Adam”, “sins of your ancestors” (passed down through fathers) and judgement received for their transgressions (Academic accelerator, 2023). Just as children inherit the physical attributes of their parents, ancestral sin postulates that wrongdoings and their consequences can too be passed down through bloodline. This notion dates back to Proclus of Athens and is ubiquitous in many modern cultures. Initially characterised as inherited flaw and punishment for the sins of one's predecessors, the concept has since forked, each expanded and further theorised.

The Christian Church today generally adopts the view of a more fatherly God. Man did not inherit Adam's guilt but the general *tendency* to sin, and the grim teachings on ancestral sin littered across scripture serve as a deterrent, not judgement (Focus on Family, 2021). The secular perspective by skeptics dismisses the Judeo-Christian-Islam God and portrays a stance that is more penalising of the human, attributing their perpetual failures to *human nature* instead of divine justice. The departure from the sovereignty of a higher power meant that humans are free agents, and their outcomes are not in whole externally determined; humans are not powerless against their own tribulations but have the capacity to

ameliorate their daily living (though the premise of this view begs its own question). The third perspective anchors itself on modern science and attributes the issue to the *flaws in our genome*. In this view, the inclination to do wrong is biologically hardwired in humans and part of the genetic material passed on through bloodline—withstanding possible reprieve. In other words, for example, immoral parents do not produce immoral children, but children with the propensity to be immoral. Along the same vein, parents who have (or had) cancer do not pass the sickness to their descendants but the potential to contract it.

It is worth to note that in spite of disparate ideologies, all three enduring views on ancestral sin lend plausibility to the notion that humans gravitate towards failure; that it is unnatural and effortful for humans to do good; that an external, supplementary force is required to save them from doom or increase their success rate in betterment.

What Christianity Says About Ancestral Sin

My biblical knowledge on this topic amounts to that of an average inquisitive Christian who is Google-trained. I will attempt, however clumsily, to be error-free—albeit knee-deep—in my understanding of ancestral sin according to Christian thought. And for articulation’s sake I will include biblical passages as well as ideas from the Christian leader and writer, Robert Henderson.

The Bible is intolerant of iniquity yet strangely compassionate with its progenitors. The most salient verses on this topic are 1) Exodus 34:7: “Yet he [God] does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sins of the parents to the third and fourth generation”, and 2) Exodus 20:5: “You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.” [1] Other passages that talk about the generational curse, mostly in the Old Testament, can be found in Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Numbers. An example of such a curse can be found in Deuteronomy 27-

28, paired with a list of scenarios in which people would reject God's law and suffer the consequences of the curse. When ancient Israel broke the covenant with God, these curses came upon them. And since ancient Israelites went about their ways (e.g., diaspora, exile) and proliferated, the curses affected multiple generations (McCoy, 2023).

Nature of Generational Curses According to Christianity

Curses are caused by sin and transgression. Sin is the Hebrew word *chata'ah*, which means to *miss*. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" from Romans 3:23 means that mankind has sinned and missed the mark (that God set) and will not partake in the prize. Note that sin in its broadest construction includes the thought to do wrong, which Jesus talks about this in his teaching on adultery in Matthew 5:27-28. Transgression as a Hebrew word is *pasha*, meaning rebellion, to break away from authority and tread beyond boundaries. In other words, sin can be understood as an unjust intention that leads to a revolt, one that if left unchecked evolves into a trait that is then embedded in the bloodline, becoming an iniquity. This crooked nature, which in Hebrew is *avon* and means perversity (or the propensity to be evil), is the punishment Exodus 34:7 is referring to. Robert Henderson (2016) thinks this punishment manifests in the form of curses, and their characteristics are succinctly categorised as

- 1) a negative mindset that blurs life's vision for the future.
- 2) an inescapable loop of bad things (happening to you).
- 3) living in darkness and aimlessness.
- 4) breakdown of marriages and homes.
- 5) children being taken captive (by vices and evil influences).
- 6) no prosperity (lack of harvest i.e., no yield from labour, work or career).
- 7) sickness that cannot be healed.
- 8) no anointing or diminished effects of anointing.
- 9) mental and emotional issues.
- 10) curse of being stolen from.

Generational Curses Evidenced in Modern Society

If curses are enacted upon us for our disobedience, and God “visits the iniquity of the fathers” up to the fourth generation, doesn’t this imply that our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren inevitably suffer the same fates, and suffer for our sinful mistakes? Yet, Ezekiel 18:20 says “The one who sins is the one who will die. The child will not share the guilt of the parent, nor will the parent share the guilt of the child. The righteousness of the righteous will be credited to them, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against them.” These two verses contradict each other at the basic level when juxtaposed. Let’s look at it with context.

Suppose a pair of parents, one an alcoholic and another a gambling addict, raises two children. The children are subjected to constant abuse by the alcoholic parent and neglect from the parent with the gambling addiction. Any of the two parents could cause the family to be bankrupt or to live undesirably (which if happened could drastically change everyone’s lives). After prolonged alcohol abuse, the alcoholic parent dies from liver failure. The other parent gets convicted of fraud and goes to prison. The children grew up, eventually becoming parents. But as they were left to their own devices while growing up, they were emotionally unstable and developed violent tendencies. Without knowing better, they indiscriminately carry the ill effects of their parents’ poor parenting into their own parenting styles and unintentionally create for their own children an inharmonious home.

While it is sound to say that the children were not *directly* punished for their parents’ bad habits, the abuse and neglect they received developed other detrimental traits (impulsiveness and violence) that in turn afflict their own children. Does this mean that they were *still* punished for their parents’ transgressions? Or is this the inheritance of their parents’ iniquity? Either way, it appears to be a downward spiral. I say this with some feeling. But if you think the example is extreme, just examine your surroundings (close friends, neighbours,

social circles, communities) or trace your lineage up to two or three generations (grandparents and extended families) and you should spot patterns and similarities:

- 1) Divorced parents whose children marry or become single parents.
- 2) Abusive parents whose children cannot connect emotionally.
- 3) Liberal parents whose children are irresponsible or undiscerning.
- 4) Autocratic parents whose children are weak-willed.
- 5) Emotional or apathetic parents whose children get in and out of relationships.
- 6) Parents who experienced adversity in relationships raise children who become homosexual.
- 7) Absentee parents whose children are deficient in character.
- 8) An estranged child grows up to be a “chip of the old block”.
- 9) A family that cannot get out of poverty and vice (addictions).
- 10) An illness that is passed down the generations.

Both verses (Exodus 34:7, Ezekiel 18:20) seem to withstand the inspection. While the penalty for sins committed end with the wrongdoers (as taught by Ezekiel 18:20), the effects of the transgressions can be transmitted through bloodline up to four generations and also by familial and environmental contributors (although scripture does not explicitly mention the latter two). What then is scripture’s prescription for parents who wish to alleviate the pains of our iniquity?

Undoing Generational Curses from the Christian Perspective

In the literal sense, scripture is vague in providing relief. We are only given the Old Testament that identifies the root of the problem as a legal issue—in Exodus and Deuteronomy. With no clear solution from the Old Testament, allow me to again refer to Henderson. Citing the example of the famine that took place in Israel during the reign of King David, the Christian author extends from scripture to suggest that *every human suffering has a spiritual culprit*, however natural the occurrence seems to be. He furthers his reasoning

by then coming in line with scripture: the three-year famine ceased only after King David repaid the Gibeonites' blood debt caused by Saul. Henderson pushes on to say that human sufferings are brought about by curses that can only be dealt with in the *spiritual realm* (2016). But where is this spiritual realm? If it is an issue of legality, where in scripture is the legal code? With some searching, I settled with the set of commandments passed down to Moses. From my own readings, the commandments (originally meant as "ten words") were not merely Godly standards to adhere to, but they also served as 1) a guide for creating a civil, orderly, and moral civilisation and 2) a reminder to humans to revere God or not prosper (beyond material gains) (DeYoung, 2018). Failure to observe the commandments, which constitutes to sinning, would require "cleansing", usually in the form of animal sacrifices without blemish to "take the blame" on behalf of the wrongdoer(s). Spiritual sensibilities aside, this ritual appears deficient in intent; there is no determination to eliminate the traits that were developed (and eventually get passed on) as a result of continual sin.

We see salvation only in the New Testament, when Jesus' teachings supersede that of the Old Testament's and the law of the commandment. Representative of all verses that talk about this is perhaps Galatians chapter 3:13: Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree,"). In Henderson's thinking, Jesus became the curse for us with his death. The saving deed is done, but the power to overcome the devil's legal rights has to be claimed—by us. Henderson says in his book that in order "to renounce the legal power of the (devil's) curse, an execution of prayer and outward faith is required. For curses cannot 'land' illegally (in the spirit realm), and God cannot stop Satan, the adversary, from ruining our lives if we do not remove the legal right of Satan—until we declare His salvation, take Jesus' supreme sacrifice into the courts of heaven, and remove its legality" (2016). This is done with repentance and interceding through prayer and faith.

A Warrant for Henderson's Claim

While I have no misgivings about spiritual potency, I am acutely aware that spiritual principles, however flimsy, can be highly unquestionable. In my contemplation of a warrant, I was prompted to look in scripture, which I did. I encountered the story of Abraham, and Lot's escape from the city of Sodom. Known as the "father of all nations" and from whom came Jesus Christ, Abraham was a righteous man who walked closely with God throughout his life. He built four altars (places of slaughter and sacrifice) in his lifetime, one each whenever he experienced a spiritual peak. Sacrifices were usually in the form of "clean" animals burnt as a form of worship to God. Abraham pleased God not because he was blameless, but because of his unwavering faith, supremely proven by his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac as an act of obedience (of course, God had wanted his heart, not his son). Abraham and Lot shared a relationship like father and son, but the latter suffered a drastically different outcome from Abraham. It is implied in scripture that Lot was a righteous man like Abraham, though he did not live like him (Bruno, 2012). When they parted ways in Canaan, he chose to live in Sodom, a corrupt city infested with grievous sin. Lot was spared death when Sodom was eventually destroyed by God, but afterward led a vigourless life. While both Lot and Abraham were righteous men (through their faith), they had different outcomes. Abraham was always looking to God, but not for Lot. Abraham built altars and redeemed himself through sacrifices. Lot did not. It can be inferred from the story that being righteous is inadequate because humankind is not blameless, and the only redemption comes in the form of a willingness to (provide or become a) sacrifice. Mapping to Henderson's method, as Christ's teachings have superseded the Old Testament's, redemption is now claimed through intercession. Through faithful prayer at the (spiritual) altar, we submit ourselves as a sacrifice, cleanse ourselves of our sins and repent through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We do this every time we falter in the flesh.

Personal Evidence of Ancestral Sin

[We should be aware] that the maintenance of the belief
in individual freedom is not without considerable cost.
(Herbert M. Lefcourt, *Locus of Control*, p. 3)

I am ethnic Chinese, born and raised in Singapore. My parents came from humble backgrounds, were moderately educated for their times, and held blue-collar jobs. As with many of their contemporaries, they were raised in large families and turned financially independent at an early age. As parents, they were fairly affectionate but had no tender feelings for family or outsiders. For the most part of my growing up, my father was a quick-tempered, unpredictable authoritarian who displayed bouts of violence and mild physical abuse on occasions. My mother, who grew up being made to neglect her own desires, dedicated herself unyieldingly to fulfilling them while raising me. I was adequately cared for until I was in primary school. Any additional time they had usually revolved around their personal interests and matters such as my mother's social gatherings and my father's volunteer work. My father's teachings were conservative and mostly in the form of stern rebukes, disapprovals, and corporal punishment. I have little impression of my mother's teachings.

The Influence of Nuclear Family

When I was nine, I was brought to church by my parents, where I stayed until I was fifteen (and returned in my adulthood). I was not religious. Part reason was because church services resembled a circus, especially corporate prayer which I thought was a sham. Worshippers would pray out loud in "tongues"—an unintelligible language defined by the charismatic church as a spirit-led utterance—at the top of their voices. At times, they would seemingly be "possessed" by the Holy Spirit and exhibit peculiar behaviours such as rolling on the floor and laughing or crying uncontrollably. It was a bizarre spectacle. The chief

reason for my dispassionate faith, however, (in retrospect, as my conscious mind never allowed me to question my parents or church authority) was due to a persisting dichotomy between my parents' behaviours at church and home. They had contrasting demeanours at church and home—it was as if Christianity was an additional piece of garment they wore on Fridays (for cell group meetings) and Sundays. Christianity had no *observable* impact on them and even if I had been obtuse, I do not recall being at the receiving end of whatever good that came out of their faith. In my opinion, conviction squares with conduct. It was not so for them. Still, I modelled after them because God was intangible.

My formative years were disquiet and uneventful. In primary school I was an above-average student. My teachers thought I had the temperament for oratory tasks and artistic skills, and a talent for music—all of which my parents paid no mind to. I fared poorly as a teenager, suffering under inferior social skills, immature romantic relationships, poor financial management, and misguided aspirations—mistakes I kept repeating well into my adulthood. I was in my early twenties when it occurred to me how I resembled my parents. Confucius says that “Learning without reflection is a waste, reflection without learning is dangerous”. It might appear strange to quote a secular spiritual leader, yet it is oddly appropriate because it underscores my realisation: I had identical flaws to my parents. I was impulsive, obdurate, and narrow-minded. I was seldom the apt person in any social, intellectual, or religious situation, and adhered to no rules apart from my own. Occasionally I would be moved to change and set New Year resolutions but by and large I operated under this disposition until I got married.

You might be questioning as to why I am making these slighting references to my personality (or my parents'). I am not grumbling or impassioning my case. It is important to understand how it all climaxes to the turning point and sets the backdrop for change. When my cluttered and stormy reflections eventually culminated in a heart-to-heart talk with my

mother, I was a full-grown adult who firmly believed that the injustice at home cheated me of chances and advantages, and that their parenting blighted me. That simple conversation turned out to be penetrating. Through an unreserved account of my father's childhood and his behaviours as an individual, spouse, and parent, I saw how I could be heading toward a destiny no different from his. Am I becoming my father? Do I have autonomy? *Or is this my fate?*

I should mention that I am aware of the corroding effects of hindsight bias, which can lead me to recollect an inaccurate past based on my dislike for its outcome (Chan, 2022). I was careful in writing about my growing up experience, of my parents, and of what I felt during those moments.

The Magnitude of Fate and Conscious Thought on Behavioural Outcomes

It is imperative at this point to include a brief discussion on the concepts of fate, fatalism, and determinism. Fate, or fatalism, is a type of social axiom entrenched in the belief of an inescapable “whatever will be will be” (Maercker et al., 2019), because “the future's not for us to see” (pun intended). Long classified as “mysterious and superstitious” before its more rational counterpart offered sophisticated explanations (refer to Lefcourt's *Locus of Control* for a study of the concepts), the fatalistic view simply says that no medical intervention will change the outcome if the human is doomed to die. Similarly, if the human is destined for longevity, no degree of adversity will truncate his or her lifespan. I am reminded of the logical fallacy, “Even if I tried, I wouldn't be able to change my destiny, and since I can't change my destiny, why should I try?” Such a circular reasoning makes for a self-fulfilling prophesy. Determinism, a more benevolent version of fatalism, believes that the human's outcome can be played out according to will—not wildly, but within controlled parameters predetermined by unseen power or forces. Using the same example, the human who is stricken with illness can only delay, not negate death. Meaning to say, while it is

possible to earn a few more years through medical treatment, the ultimate outcome of death by (the) illness remains.

While fatalism and determinism as theological, sociocultural, and psychological constructs emphasise on the futility of human decision-making and the foreordination of destiny, the former is a gloomier take on the concept i.e., the plaintive song *Que Sera Sera*, while the latter recognises the human as part of the causal chain of events—albeit only as much as within what is already predestined by a higher providence. Corroborating with scripture that makes apparent the idea of how humans are born natural sinners with an alarming ability to hurt and destroy (Perman, 2006), it does seem pointless for humans to rise up against their inevitable failures and consequences. So, should we? Can we change things? The short answer is yes.

Behaviour matters. When I knew of my sister-in-law's second pregnancy, my wife and I decided that both families should meet before they got busy. We picked a venue somewhere equidistant from where my brother's family and mine live. My children were excited to see their cousin and we reached early. I called my brother and found out that he was still home because his daughter had not woken from her nap. This bothered me, and for the rest of the meeting (they eventually turned up) I was focused on maintaining composure. Later on, when I visited them on my own, my sister-in-law sat me down and delicately hinted to me that I needed to be more flexible with timing. I found myself smiling uncharacteristically while keeping it in. I was tempted to relate an incident to her. I had an intimate gig years ago when my children were about the age of my niece. My friend (herein known as *N*), a fellow musician in the band, agreed to bring his children (who were older than mine) to help decorate the venue before the show. I said I would do the same. When I got delayed and arrived late, *N* and his children were done with decorating the place. I apologised but thought nothing of it until another musician from the band told me afterward

that *N* had rescheduled his family plans for our arrangement. In hindsight, I had thought I had an excuse because *N* would naturally understand my plight as a fellow parent—to the extent that my lateness should not have mattered to him. Perhaps it did not, but that did not mean that I could take it for granted.

Over the years of my marriage, I have become calmer and prudent, for which I owe the credit to my spouse and two children (perhaps to my age as well). I am fortunate to have a pragmatic and gracious wife, who with incredible patience, especially in the early years of our marriage, broadened my views on many real-world things and showed me through concrete actions and deliberate inactions that while conflict is inevitable, falling out is not. My children, who constantly mirror my behaviour, make me mindful of my *intuition* and *behaviour*. Together, my family put me through repeated exercises of careful thinking and doing, and over time I have become accustomed to examining my automatic thinking. Concurrent with my own reform, my wife and I have been intentional in 1) nurturing our children's cognitive, affective, and behavioural qualities [through imparting Christian and Chinese values, family values, teachings of old, rhetoric and social skills, critical thinking skills, introspective skills, self-discipline, and so forth], and 2) educating them *out* of their reactive nature [which they inherited from me mostly] by way of demonstrating, as far as possible, a more rational system of conduct. I even have a mantra that I repeatedly insert into my lectures to my children: *all emotions are welcome, but not all behaviours are*.

But this is not to say that I have exorcised my old self or successfully kept my children's instinctive natures under lock and key. In fact, our old (or might I say, default) selves surface from time to time, especially when we are stressed or overwhelmed. I have been keeping an account of my daily moods in a mobile application for six months, and it tells me that on a monthly average I am mostly “pleased”, “focused”, and “mellow”, with occasional “discouraged” and “apathetic”. Over a course of six months, I checked in once as

“annoyed” for a disagreement with my older child’s teacher, once as “peeved” for a professional conflict, and once as “disheartened” for an argument with my wife. Upon inspection, my “old self” played a part in two out of the three conflicts. It is evident that my old self is just waiting for the right time to pounce.

The Impact of Conscious Parenting on My Children

I will now do a simple comparison of my children’s dispositions to mine. To be fair, I shall compare their current dispositions to (what memory I have of) my twelve-year old self (in-between my older child who is thirteen and my younger child who is eleven) and use ten “ailments” I inherited from my parents *and* displayed at that age. I will state if my children were “not born with it” to indicate the possibility of their mother’s genetic influence on their genotype. If the inherited ailment has shown signs of improvement, I will indicate “CIP” (Correction-In-Progress). A “yes” indicates that the child has maintained the inherited “ailment”. I leave IQ out.

Category	Ailments (at 12 years old)	Older child	Younger child
Cognitive	Divided attention	CIP	Not born with it
	Poor logic and reasoning	CIP	CIP
Affective	Poor financial management	CIP	CIP
	Irresponsibility	Not born with it	CIP
	Quick-temperedness	CIP	Yes
Behavioural	Single-mindedness	Yes	CIP
	Confrontational	Not born with it	Yes
	Lack of integrity	CIP	Not born with it
	Procrastination	Yes	CIP
	Gullibility	CIP	Not born with it

My older child inherited more of my “ailments” than my younger child (8 and 7 respectively) and has more “Correction-In-Progress” (6 and 5 respectively). Each child has two “ailments” that have yet to make progress.

By design, my older child has the biological blueprint of what can be regarded as a librarian. A stickler for regulations, she stays distinctly within lines, is highly agreeable but also highly particular, and processes information reactively than preemptively. If you drew a line and told her to tread only on it, she might wonder to herself but accede to your request. Note that you wouldn’t need to provide a reason. Reasons do not give her more purpose. If other people appeared, she would take it upon herself to ensure that they do she is doing, failing in which would annoy her. At times, her tender-mindedness stalls her logical reasoning. On the other hand, my younger child’s indelicate nature is made obvious through her skepticism of standards and norms. A born campaigner, her curiosity and cynicism for that line you drew disallows her to say yes to you. In fact, she might have already begun wondering the moment you lifted your pen to draw the line. You might try to pressure her into agreeing but it wouldn’t faze her. If she presses for a reason, and depending on your response, she might skirt or prance about the line and if it pleased her, would proclaim with an inner muted shout of victory how she was right not to have conformed. If she fell while dancing, it would take a shrug to carry on. She would ignore whoever else came along.

My observation tells me that conscious parental behaviour thus far has an appreciable effect in calibrating my children’s characters. Improvements in moral framework, thought processing, and behaviours are far from colossal but signs of deviating from their instinctive natures are empirical. My older child is becoming more adventurous and can be seen low-key experimenting whenever in doubt. She has not forsaken her own idiosyncrasies—stemming from her singlemindedness—but a gradual easing into the idea of being “particular, not difficult” (a motto I persistently include in my counselling) can be observed. Through

consistent counselling and purposeful social activities, my free-spirited younger child is increasingly disclosing social mindfulness. She is yet in full control of her quick-temperedness but has begun to embrace the idea of “unkindness begets unkindness” and can be seen leaning into that notion in her day-to-day social dealings: “if I do this, where does it go from here?”

Not there yet, but not without hope. Both my children are not yet deft in avoiding even low-grade conflicts, but their occasional attempts in sound reasoning for the conflicts they find themselves are evidence of induced change. In their respective schools, they have been recognised for their ethics and, within their social circles, appreciated for virtues like impartiality, honesty, and thriftiness—all of which I did not have when I was of that age. While these improvements might attest to the effects of parental intervention, they could also rightfully be a natural result due to my wife’s genes or be attributed to the overall improvements in our educational systems and the influence of environment. There are, however, areas that neither parenting nor environment has affected, chiefly the tendency to procrastinate and lack of self-control.

It is reasonable to deduce from 1) my growing up experience, 2) my experience as a parent, and 3) the implied destructive nature of humans [discussed in the first part of this essay as the secular, skeptic view] that 1) the effect of debased parenting on children is children growing up as copies of their parents, that 2) it is unlikely to remove a person’s natural tendencies by way of parenting, and 3) that parents can moderately affect their children’s characters through example and behaviour. By way of extrapolation, absolution from the effects of ancestral sin is probably unattainable within my children’s generation and perhaps even their children’s. It is however not without possibility and definitely worth considering if we see ourselves as part of the human continuum.

The Science Behind Ancestral Sin

The special function of scientific explanation is...
to turn the unexpected, as far as possible, into the expected.
(Stephen Toulmin, *Reason in Ethics*, p. 88)

It is not unthinkable to say that science is always catching up with natural phenomenon, judging how humans have not ceased investigating into things they do not know. Granted that the crux of understanding nature and nurture as an intellectual inquiry could still be inaccessible to the human mind, it nonetheless commands the attention of scholars and stakeholders. It was not too long ago when people believed, even with genes considered, that their personal choices made them unique as individuals. The essence of human autonomy lay in the ownership of one's unique past, present, and future. In this genomic age, what is left of the human autonomy qualifies as one of the most important questions in social sciences today. There are those who believe that our genealogy and decisions affect our cognitive abilities and there are others who dispute using kinship studies (twin, adoption), and assert that our intelligence is mostly the product of our genes. Herein, "cognitive abilities", "intelligence" and the likes are synonymous, defined as 1) "the mental process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses" and 2) the heuristic of intelligence manifesting as [a] mental acuity [b] habits of mind [c] vocabulary, knowledge [d] rote memory and working memory (Flynn, 2009). It is vital to note that modern science's varieties of thought are so diverse that even a careful account of it is in danger of mutating into a history of general ideas. The question therefore presses as to who and what to include and exclude. Specialists will find that much has been omitted for the sake of a befitting comparison with the earlier two sections.

The Influence of Genes on Aptitude and Flaws

James R. Flynn, an intelligence researcher and professor of political studies, initially argued that IQ is influenced more by environment than genetic evolution (the study was on

IQ results that spanned a century); that genes allow environment and choice far more scope than as defined by kinship studies—based on the observation that the rate of IQ increase had been too fast and dramatic to have been caused by genetic changes (later known as the Flynn effect). Flynn attributed the substantial rise in IQ to a few factors, including the increases in education and exposure to better foods. However, he subsequently discovered that *family has little effect on whatever cognitive abilities one has after the age of seventeen*, and once the influence of family disappears, the cognitive quality of one's environment tends to match the person's genetic quality (known as the tendency toward “gene-environment correlation”). What is more alarming about his findings is that regardless of having a raised IQ in the early years due of family, it is not indelible, and starts to wane as one passes the age of seventeen, disappearing upon adulthood (Flynn, 2016). IQ was partitioned from intelligence because Flynn perceived IQ gains are measurable “symptoms” of true cognitive gains.

Arthur Jensen echoed in part to Flynn's findings with his twin studies that showed genes to be nearly all-powerful in determining IQ. Jensen's studies revealed that the effect of systematic environments (like family) on the differences in cognitive skill accounts for so little that the environmental gap difference had to be implausibly huge to matter (p.6). Following the study, Jensen describes intelligence as a petrol station deep in the recesses of the brain, unaffected by normal environmental differences. In Flynn's commentary on Jensen's meta-theory of intelligence, “the petrol station pumps a certain quantity of neural energy called true *g* to the various engines of the conscious mind...the only way the engines could perform better was a better grade of *g-fuel*...practice effects did nothing to upgrade the *g-fuel* but just made the engine purr: it just produced higher scores that had no real-world significance.” In Jensen's thinking, the only way to significantly increase intelligence is through *better* genes (p.111). With this theory, Flynn found his answer to the host of problems surrounding the curious IQ gains. Simply, the registered IQ gains were not real evidence (or,

true *g* gain) as they were a result of practice or a learned response to the social world and had no real-world significance. Meaning to say, a child can be competent in IQ testing through practice but is still slower in learning a new concept than those more intelligent because the child's *g-fuel* grade is inferior to theirs.

Epigenetics, an exciting new development in DNA studies, is an interdisciplinary social and biomedical discipline that investigates semi-stable biological features that play a role in controlling gene expression without changes in the underlying DNA sequence. Elevating environmental influences as equal to genome, epigenetics and social scientists claim that early experiences (infancy to kindergarten) can affect genes and propose that earlier ideas of genes being “set in stone” or that they alone determine development have been disproven. Referring to the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child:

Contrary to popular belief, the genes inherited from one's parents do not set a child's future development in stone...the environment in which one develops, before and soon after birth, provides powerful experiences that chemically modify certain genes which, in turn, define how much and when they are expressed. Environmental factors have the ability to alter the genes that were inherited...epigenome can be affected by positive experiences, such as supportive relationships and opportunities for learning, or negative influences, such as environmental toxins or stressful life circumstances, which leave a unique epigenetic “signature” on the genes. These signatures can be temporary or permanent and both types affect how easily the genes are switched on or off. Recent research demonstrates that there may be ways to reverse certain negative changes and restore healthy functioning.”

(National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010)

Recent DNA studies also indicate that environmental contributors account for up to 50 percent of intelligence and despite only 5 percent of said contributors have been identified so far, evolutionary biologists have laid claim to the influence of epigenome to be as far-reaching as non-genetic transmission. Based on animal observations, scientists are confident that self-control, decision-making, and sociability can be affected by epigenome, and in

response have devised a concept called *inclusive heritability* that combines all sources of genetic and non-genetic information inherited across generations. Relying on epigenetic “marks” that cause phenotypic changes in animals, epigenetics transmission has been further divided into behavioural, cultural, and ecological information (David et al., 2019).

Epidemiological studies in mice revealed that their metabolic profile is influenced by the diets of their fathers and grandfathers. Recognised as epigenetic programming (the transmissions of chemical modifications to the DNA), environmental factors can alter the epigenetic modifications to DNA, which can be inherited, impacting the gene expression of the offspring. Conjoining studies that suggest that the results from mice study applies to humans, this information may provide not only insights to the increase in obesity and cardiovascular disease for people whose grandparents experienced famine, but also the biological basis for biblical passages like Exodus 34:7. (Rana, 2011) In contrast, the 2012 study of 800 pairs of twins published in the *Journal of Personality* by the University of Edinburgh showed that genetics were more influential in developing key traits. Professor Timothy Bates thinks that we all might have been smitten by the notion that family and environment around home can counter genetic prowess (University of Edinburgh, 2012).

Out of the average 20,000 genes that a person has, 22 have been identified to be related to intelligence. While the science reveals that genes can be turned “on” and “off” especially for early human experiences, we do not yet know how to do so for the “intelligence genes”. To further suggest at this point that the novel findings in epigenetics liquefy all scientific and non-scientific explanations on ancestral sin risks mischaracterising epigenetics as the singular (or a singular, for that matter) mechanism for genetic modification and multigenerational transmission of iniquity (Huang, King, 2018). Also, imagine a person who has led an immoral life decides to turn over a new leaf. The individual finds faith and prays fervently to God for pardon and healing. If we believe that inherited iniquity is

embedded in epigenetics, then we would believe that the genes that caused this person to sin can be *willed* into being ineffective or dormant, and once established will not be passed down to his or her offspring. This is speculative and uncritically optimistic, noting how epigenetics is the least developed area of investigation in genetic science and keeping in mind other evidences that do not support this claim. While the impact of intelligence (extreme high and low IQ) on a person's decision-making faculties is evident, *it is cursory to say that a person's behaviour or misbehaviour (especially of morals) is equally dependent on inherited brains or the lack thereof*. Similarly, as the notion of humans capable of affecting the mind and character of their offspring increasingly shows promise through epigenetics, we should not be ready to narrow down our evidences to DNA studies. Bearing these in mind, let's review a renowned psychological concept against our dilemma: Daniel Kahneman's theory of decision-making.

The Science of Behaviour and Decision-Making.

The concept from Kahneman that is relevant here is extracted from his Nobel-winning theory, the Prospect Theory of Decision-Making—also discussed in his book (Kahneman, 2011). The central theme to his concept is two-fold: 1) there are two ways in which we think, and 2) it is all about the cost of attention and effort. According to Kahneman, there are two different systems in our brain constantly fighting for control of our behaviours and actions, which he calls System 1 and System 2. Simply, System 1 is intuitive and impressionistic thinking, responsible for survival (and thus fast thinking) and System 2 is slow thinking, in charge of careful and logical deductions. Kahneman took pains to explain the biases of (fast) intuition, the limitations of the (slow) working mind, and the perpetual involuntary war inside our heads for control of our memory, judgement, and decisions. Quoting his opening on System 1 thinking:

Most impressions and thoughts arise in your conscious experience without you knowing how they got there. You cannot trace how you came to believe that there is a lamp on the desk in front of you, or how you detected a hint of irritation in your spouse's voice on the telephone, or how you managed to avoid a threat on the road before you became consciously aware of it. The mental work that produces impressions, intuitions, and many decisions goes on in silence in our mind (p. 4).

Some examples from Kahneman of automatic activities attributed to System 1:

- 1) Orient to the source of a sudden sound.
- 2) Make a "disgust face" when shown a horrible picture.
- 3) Complete the phrase "bread and...".
- 4) Detect that one object is more distant than another.
- 5) Detect hostility in a voice.

System 2, on the other hand, is fully conscious and requires attention, and is disrupted when it is taken away. Some examples:

- 1) Search in memory to identify a surprising sound.
- 2) Count the occurrences of the letter *o* in a page of text.
- 3) Maintain a faster walking speed than is natural for you.
- 4) Compare two mobile phones for overall value.
- 5) Fill out a visa form.

System 2 thinks that its orderliness and ability to assess and reason are what represent the human, but the main character is in fact System 1. Being remarkably fast, System 1 always jumps into focus before System 2, unless concentration is required. However, the (survival) ability of System 1 comes with a list of cognitive biases that can be socially costly and impair relationships. I believe it is no stress for my readers to recall instances when they were subjected to cognitive biases, logical fallacies, or unreasonable arguments and behaviours. Those instances (you just recollected) were System 1 in full tilt and taken to the extreme. Now, consider the statements and situations below:

- 1) "If you drop out of school, you will get into bad company and do badly in life".

- 2) Raising your voice or fists to the person who persistently disagrees with you.
- 3) “Women are terrible drivers”.
- 4) “If you choose arts for a living, you will be a good-for-nothing”.
- 5) Good looking people tend to get away with things.
- 6) Attributing the mistake to the person with a record of making mistakes.
- 7) “Plumbing is a job for men”.
- 8) Not befriending someone because your gut tells you not to.
- 9) “My experience tells me this person is not hireable”.
- 10) Losing your temper because the adolescent keeps challenging your authority.

The list is arranged according to increasing difficulty for System 1 thinking. You might disagree instantaneously at first, but as you go down the list you gradually become hesitant in deciding whether the situation, sentence, or behaviour is unreasonable. You feel that way because you are searching your brain for references while putting yourself through an approximating procedure. Kahneman calls this *attention and effort*. This intentional search is a task for System 2. To better appreciate how it feels:

What is your estimate of the PSLE AL score average that students will obtain this year?

What is the percentage of Chinese students who obtain a better AL score?

The difference in the questions should be obvious, but you probably need a second look to detect it. Referring to the human mind as an economy of action, where effort is a cost, and the acquisition of a skill is driven by the balance of benefits and cost, Kahneman says that our behaviour and decisions all boil down to how much *attention* is to be afforded and how much *effort* is required. In case you are wondering, both are mental capacities but with a subtle difference. Attention is like a reservoir of mental energy from which resources are drawn to meet situational demands, while effort is a cognitive skill used to process various mental workloads. Humans naturally go for what is easier or more available (pp. 31-38), for instance

picking the food stall with the shortest queue during recess; raising your voice instead of reasoning it out with your spouse; giving your child the mobile phone because you would like a peaceful meal; penalising instead of counselling a student for misconduct; choosing to lecture your child on the importance of literacy instead of inculcating the habit of reading by example; choosing to quit your job as resolve over working out the conflict with your colleagues; resigning to “fate” when options seem to run out, and so forth. The ramifications of these “mental shortcuts” that *instigate behaviour* might be negligible for inconsequential matters such as what to eat for lunch and whether you should always have a fully charged mobile phone, but for important decisions such as related to relationships and family upbringing, the effect is pernicious.

As gloomy as it seems, Kahneman provides a silver lining: System 2 can (be trained to) tame, moderate, and correct your intuitive predictions (pp. 185-195). I once taught on the topic of thinking fast and speaking slow to my university students. It was a three-hour lecture with activities, but the gist of it goes something like this. It is harmless in letting intuition take control of simple tasks (for e.g., commenting on your peer’s online “status” or chatting casually with your mother’s church friends whom you meet occasionally) but better to give more care (i.e., activate System 2) to consequential tasks such as communicating your unhappiness about your spouse to your spouse, having meal-time conversations with your superior, disciplining your toddler, counselling your teenager in relationship issues, etc. However, withholding your opinion might only be a stopgap solution. A surer way to keep your intuitive behaviour at bay is not refrain but *refinement*—through better quality experience, introspection, and practice (a form of experiential learning). As with any task that requires *attention* and *effort*, you will need resources and appropriate skill. The good news here is that attention as a resource is expandable and skill can be honed.

Conclusion

It is consistent in all three views that humankind is imperfect and requires correction. From the biblical perspective, it can be achieved through a constant spiritual dependance on God through repentance, prayer, and faith. Personal evidence shows a glimmer of hope through the quality of lived experience, thoughtfulness, and behaviours. In the thinking of modern science, epigenetics claims the promise of treating our genetic ailments. Should gene modification be the future of undoing the flaws of our biological inheritance, this paradigm would only be complete with *guided thoughtfulness*; only with an upright moral compass and diligence can humans achieve betterment. Borrowing Robert C. Solomon's eloquent take on spirituality, "under the presumptions that 1) the idea of spirituality has much to do with thoughtfulness, 2) that spirituality is not at odds with, but rather in cahoots with science, and 3) spirituality is by no means limited to religion" (Solomon, 2002) my Christian faith naturally acts as a lynchpin to this enlarged view of "parenting away" ancestral sin. I certainly hope my attempt will not be futile.

In closing, allow me to leave you with something to ponder. 2 Samuel 7:12 says, "When your days are over and you rest with ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom." In this passage, God makes a promise to King David, known as the man after God's own heart, that Jesus will come from his bloodline. If heredity does not matter, why was God particular in preserving the bloodline of David whose lineage is from Abraham, and why was Jesus a virgin birth, born distinctly different from all men since Adam? And if humans were able to overcome their genetic ailments on their own, why did the omniscient God have to sacrifice His Son to take our blame?

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