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Neither nurture nor nature, but self-creation

Evo Busseniers

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An often heated discussion is on whether we are influenced by nature or nurture: is our identity formed by society, or by our genes? This discussion often manifests itself on the topic of gender: are men and women biologically determined to act different, or is this conditioned by society?

One of the reasons I think this discussion is so heated, is because both parties feel their free will is denied. Since if we could for example assume that women are biologically determined to be more caring, this can be used as an argument that they have to stay at home to take care of the children. On the other hand, if society dictates our behavior independent of who we inherently are, how can we still say we are autonomous?

I think neither (or both) parties are right, and that we create ourselves. Sure, we cannot just pop up out of a vacuum, we have our biological base which forms our selves under the influence of all kinds of environmental inputs, but also simply random factors. But from all of this emerges an autonomous system, that can decide its goals, the paths it takes, and can act to form our 'selves' according to how we want it. That's be-

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cause we are partly closed and self-maintaining, with internal loops to achieve this. These loops make that we can be self-caused: we are our own cause, effect can loop back into cause. Fundamentally this means that we can set our own goals, and create ourselves. This mechanism is called autopoiesis: auto = self, poiesis = creation (think of poetry).

There are still influences from the environment, but we decide what to do with it: whether to reject, ignore, rebel against, or accept an influence. For example, when a fascist leader speaks hate speech against migrants, some will be disgusted by these words, while others would cheer for him. Sure, when you have heard a message a million times, you'll be more likely to accept it, but still, some people have a more rebellious nature and will spontaneously reject something if it is too much of a norm, while others with exactly the same environment would blindly accept it.

Think of the influences from the environment as the wind blowing on you while you are walking a cord. The wind blowing from one side will affect you to do counter-movements to stay on the cord, but the end result will still be that you stay on the cord following your path. As living systems, we are remarkably good cord dancers that can stay on the cord despite heavy winds from all sides. When we see a different cord, we might be inspired to take it, but still the cord doesn't determine our path (while I admit the difference is not always clear). And yes, sometimes the winds are too heavy so that we fall off the cord, in which case we no longer succeeded in following our path.

Back to the topic of gender: to me, the existence of transgenders is proof that we are not just determined by nature or nurture. Biological determination fails here, since why would people who are biologically female, identify and feel male? But they also feel male despite the whole society telling and educating them otherwise. Sure, some would argue they have a special gene or something, which causes them being transgender.

Others would claim it is the education that has made people transgender (they would often call this a wrong education, like there is something wrong with being transgender). But still, in general we see that despite big biological and societal influences, some people form a different identity. I'm not saying it is merely a choice or a decision: no, a complex autonomous system has formed, which has its own identity that is not merely a consequence of outside influences.

I also don't agree with the 'born-this-way'-argument that you are born gay or transgender and cannot do anything about it. It is not about whether the argument is true or not, but its usage implies that if it would be a choice, there would be something wrong with it. It is a choice to act in response to your feelings despite an unaccepting society, and it is a hell of a good choice!