

On Free Will and Identical Twins

by [Carl Nelson](#) (July 2025)



The Cholmondeley Ladies (British School, circa 1600)

This essay is intended to continue the discussion begun by Armando Simón, in his [essay](#) "Free Will is a Mirage" in the June, 2025 edition of the New English Review.

My older brothers are identical twins. One day when he was very young my older brother Gary came home quite upset and said to mom, "Mom. Is I Gary, or is I Larry?"

My mother told him, "Why you're Gary, of course."

"Well, that's what I thought," snapped Gary. "But _____ (an acquaintance) told me I was Larry!"

This episode, for me, paints a fairly revealing account of the argument regarding “free will.” As Gary appeared to be to the acquaintance, he was Larry. His fate was fixed. But Gary knew better. He knew himself to be Gary and for help went running to mom.

Isn't this much the case, as we enter (and move through) life? We are seemingly fated to be what we are. A squirrel is a squirrel. A dog is a dog. And I am me, even though I go to sleep to dream myself as all sorts of things. Yet, I wake up again, and here I am... just as I left off. You look in the mirror each day, and there is no escaping it: there you are! (Same old protruding stomach... same receding hair line.)

The fatalists among us generally describe this situation as thus: Nobody actually changes in this life, we just become more of what we are as we age.

This might very well be true of a well-lived life. But what are we?

Armando Simon writes: “Perhaps the best evidence of determinism and lack of free will are the studies of twins. To choose one pair of twins: separated at birth and raised by different families, upon being discovered in adulthood, they were found to have identical traits at an unnerving level.”

I've also read studies done of identical twins and some of the coincidental aspects of their lives are indeed, uncanny. They'll select the same product brands, wear like outfits, etc. I have two first hand experiences with identical twins. The first was that of my two older brothers, Gary and Larry. The second was that of our adopted son, Thawit, who we found later to have an identical twin brother Thawi, who grew up in England. (This is a bit of a story in itself. His brother had never been told he had an identical twin. So, it was quite a surprise when our son located him on Facebook.) Of course, they look alike. But they also shared like interests, (had

created artwork which resembled the other's), shared an interest in clothing fashion and brands, music, and cooking.

Nevertheless the idea of a fated life arranges best in hindsight. In foresight, it lacks reliability.

In hindsight, much can appear foreordained and fated. But if fatalism were proven, future predictions would have more than the mere statistical standing of an aberration. Prophets would be everywhere! Scads of people nowadays will claim to know just what a certain person would say in a certain situation. But how many are right? Personally, I'm often taken aback by how people I thought I knew respond to an event. And, my goodness, a lot of us know the awkwardness of having misjudged our audience.

Armando notes that: "A person knows how his son or wife behaves and can easily anticipate their behavior. Likewise, we all have close friends whom we know and can anticipate how they will act."

But I also find that I am often wrong in anticipating behaviors. For example, I was using a concoction which I would apply in bed for a medical condition I had. I didn't think, and I let it stain the sheets. I thought my wife would fly off the handle at my thoughtlessness. But, instead, she noted (after I'd taken all the bedding off) that we really didn't need to wash the sheets—but we could "see if the stain would come out." I can generally judge what my wife's reactions might be—but it would still be chancy to wager on any of them specifically.

One of the most common remarks I hear both in the arts and on the social media is the comment, "can we really know somebody?" All the time we encounter actions by people we "thought we knew" and just shake our heads.

On the other hand, there are actors who are quite adept, who are quite good at convincing their audience that they have

totally comprehended an individual. You'll hear this said all of the time. That there are actors so good, that they have totally "become their characters". And they are so good at selling it, that audiences consistently like the actor in the role much better than the real person. And as far as popular opinion fashions the truth, the actor's version of the individual triumphs.

But if we really can't fully know another individual, how much can we say contributed (or will contribute) to their fate?

Fatalists would imagine all that is within us, and all that there is without of us, and top of this believe they can quantify the measure of each so as to reach the inescapable conclusion that we are the fated narrative of our cumulative attributes and desires which comprise our endowment—which necessarily germinates our fate. But this is quite a stretch to take on faith, or even examples.

As writers phrase it, character determines plot. Or as the fatalists who repeat science believe, our nature is written in our genes. Or as the Bible relates it, we struggle with Original Sin. And I would wager that these generally accepted insights are true.

Nevertheless, much of what is regarded under the evidences of fatalism category might much more likely simply be the product of common sense. Sure, a man could decide to quit his job and sail to the South Seas, or escape it for the day and go to the beach. But the reason he doesn't is likely not because he is genetically pre-disposed to prefer cubicle life. Likely, he has more important priorities than his own pleasure, and common sense disciplines him—not his proclivities.

That many of the events the fatalists would consider fated may very well be nothing but the simple workings of common sense would certainly meet the criteria of Ockham's Razor, "which says that if you have two competing ideas to explain the same

phenomenon, you should prefer the simpler one.” (Google) Squirrels will climb trees and dogs will bark. Squirrels can try to bark but it comes out more as a chuckle. And dogs are generally flops at climbing trees. But they recognize this, and move on. Surely, people tend to ride their bicycles facing forward while the chimp chooses to ride it in from a multitude of comical postures. But this is not because the chimp has free will whereas we do not. It’s just common sense. Riding a bike is most successfully done facing forward, unless you’re auditioning for the circus.

It is paradoxical that those who, on the contrary, most ardently believe in nurture over nature, also believe that we are fatally determined by this nurture. In their manner they are also fatalists. Their belief is that nurture determines us, that our fate is something our substance is bent towards, rather like a bonsai shrub. In other words, they bequeath agency to the external world, while denying it to the individual. We are what our surroundings make us. For example, they hold that currently instead of having a sexual type, we exhibit a gender preference. Quixotically, it is a collective free will which designs the individual’s free will. In other words, Gary is Larry. His acquaintance interpreted the dominant understanding correctly. Now, if Gary would just shut up! we would all be on the same page and could move forward.

But he won’t, which is why we keep continuing this discussion.

It doesn’t seem fair to say that life is fated, until you’ve selected various lives at birth and described just how each will go—and then find out if you’re right. This would comprise a proper scientific proof. Until then your fatalism is simply a belief. Personally, I tend to believe just the opposite, that life is a chaotic maelstrom of free will, rather like the weather. With most people prioritizing their own desires while trying to play the cards they are dealt as successfully as they are able. If there is one thing life has seemed to tell me at my advanced age, is how many times I am wrong. (Jeeze! I

could have made so much money during the dot.com burst.) The nephew who I picked to be the greatest spoiled brat, turned out to be quite friendly and considerate. The niece who seemed most headstrong became quite deferential. Granted, I also see this other side to them, but even though...

Really, the facts are not all in, nor will they ever likely be. So, it's probably most reasonable to simply describe and live by what we believe. So I will leave the fatalist to believe what they will.

Nevertheless, to me, free will and fate exist as a dialectic; neither of which can exist without the other. Without form or structure, free will cannot exist as there would be no here nor there, no object of our desire. And without free will, form and structure would be nonsensical. What would they matter if they were or were not? So, I view free will and fate as two partners in a symbiotic process. Fate is the hand you are dealt, and free will is how you chose to play it. Fate is a squirrel, and free will is what that squirrel does with its attributes. I see fate and free will working like a hand, where fate represents the four fingers, and free will the opposable thumb. The four fingers are oriented towards the task to be done. The thumb allows the fine movements necessary to the requirements of the task. Just as the phrase "free will" contains the dialectic: "free" and "will" (which attach the inviolate and the directed).

It seems there are two cases which illustrate the intermingled relationships of fate and free will. One would be the bestowed fate of identical twins. Another would be the acquired fate of marriage. And both shared fates seemed to have resolved their difficulties by choosing activities which complimented the other's choice.

Actually, growing up with two older identical twin brothers was like watching fate and free will fighting it out every day! Larry felt that Gary should naturally want what he

wanted, and Gary felt the reverse. So that Larry wanted what Gary wanted, and Gary wanted what Larry wanted. Or, they both wanted different things, which was just darned... stupid! On this they could agree. There was a lot there to fight over! They may not have had free will, but their fate certainly disagreed with itself.

At one point, somewhere in their high school years our dad hatched the idea of bringing some calm to the situation by buying boxing gloves and setting them in the garage to hammer out a settlement. But this didn't work either. Nothing changed. To this day, they still get together regularly, get in a big hash about something or other, then cool off and it's back together chatting about this and that again. They both owned and flew airplanes. They loved to discuss planes and new technologies. They would discuss the places they visit with limited access: Oregon beaches, Canadian lakes, fly-ins, etc.. They are always either building or fixing something and could entertain themselves with endless discussions regarding the pros and cons of this and that method. I would listen to them as if it were the background music to my own wandering thoughts.

Our son and his twin are much the same and descended into argument somewhere midway through their first meeting at their 16th birthday. Then they calmed down and begin chatting again. Our son tends to dominate. He has tried to listen a bit more with our coaching. Our son speaks English with a Thai accent. His brother speaks English with a British accent. "What the hell are they going off about Global Warming for?" our son asks. "The place is cold and damp as hell."

Politics have split them.

My twin brothers, growing up, appeared to be both each other's closest friend, and each other's prime adversary. It was as if they were fighting over the same life. (I've never asked them how they would describe it.) They eerily displayed many of the

same traits. They worked together as teens fixing radios and TVs on their downstairs "test bench" to make money. They wrestled each other as freshmen in high school as they were the only ones in their weight category of around 110 pounds. (I think it was possibly their lack of wins which caused them to try out their moves on me at home.) They dressed with the same nerdy period style with taped black glasses and pen pocket plastic shields. And they both got their masters in Electrical Engineering.

While they appeared identical to others, I could easily tell them apart (even from the backside). Their unconscious strategy, if there was one, was to compliment the others abilities. For example, my estimation was that one was a little stronger, while the other was a bit more coordinated. One was the more extroverted while the other was the more introverted. (I gave them a Jungian type test at one time. One typed as an ISTJ, the other as an ESTJ.) One (the introvert) lived a more minimalist life, (less is more), of outdoor experience, while the other lived a more extroverted life (like Dolly Parton who believed "more is more".) with its successful trappings. The introverted one worked on developmental projects whose span was about seven years and moved from company to company, while the other worked for large corporations rising through management. They married college roommates and retired to travel: one by sailboat throughout the Pacific, and the other by airplane over to Europe, and then by custom bus around the US and Canada. It would seem that throughout it all one would take the back seat to the other and vice versa over their shared traits, though one tended over all to dominate. Each chose the other side of the same thing. They were engineers who worked different problems, one worked the aeronautic industry, while the other worked on the early picture phone for Bell Labs and then medical applications of analyzing pathology slides. (Me, I mostly sat by myself, humming, as when watching them at work/arguing at their test bench.)

It would seem that situation in which logic is most apt to fail are those in which unknown factors are not factored. (When we can't know it all.) And certainly, this would be the case in arguing the nature of fate. So we are left using our empirical knowledge and navigating by common sense.

Marriage is a situation in which two individuals, freely willing, choose to join their fates. The fact that marriage is seen as a portion of an individual's series of life events, would seem to indicate the importance of fate in bringing structure to an individual's life. We seem 'fated' with the need to be harnessed to something greater than ourselves. Free will alone is unfulfilling. One must feel 'fated', that is, to be a portion of something, some more important process.

Some will be married to the church (priests), others to their work, but the need is the same. And the analogy of marriage with the hand holds. The marriage, just as the hand, has an intention and an action to perform. The opposable thumb offers the skill to manipulate events so as to produce the wanted ('fated') outcome.

Likewise married partners freely chose which responsibilities to pledge to the marriage. They use their free will, much like opposable thumbs, to direct their contribution to the mutually adopted combined fate (or goal) of their marriage. My wife does the laundry and cooks dinners. I do the shopping and yard work and dishes. My duty includes fixing things and the heavy chores. The wife arranges most of the social schedule.

One reason marriage tends to fail among Progressives, I believe, is because collectives can't design a marriage very well. Their collective imagination devolves into *The Handmaid's Tale* dystopia. Their free will tends to be collectively arrived at, in which divergence would be an apostasy. This causes them to either go fanatical one way or the other, or to diverge altogether (separate). They lack the opposable thumb.

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Carl Nelson's latest book of poetry titled, *Strays, Misfits, Renegades, and Maverick Poems (with additional Verses on Monetizations)*, has just been published. To have a look at this and more of his work please visit [Magic Bean Books](#).

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