

The Meanings of Innate

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Since the notion was first introduced by D.D. Palmer circa 1904, “Innate Intelligence” (II) has been a source of inspiration, confusion and derision for chiropractors. Please note that no editorial privilege is taken by capitalizing “II,” since Old Dad Chiro meant to indicate a unique Person who, in B.J. Palmer’s phraseology, “guides, explains and directs all the function of the body from above down and inside out.”



Figure 1
Dr. D.D. Palmer.

Unlike the subluxation-complex, which is a potentially testable and potentially falsifiable construct, II is one of those *untestable* principles in chiropractic.^{1,2} Untestable

principles are not inherently inappropriate in science, and indeed, all science is based on several untestable, a priori assumptions, for example, the belief that there are potentially discoverable causes and effects. Indeed, we might even go so far as to refer to a “dogma of science,” without which scientists could not operate. However, II is not one of the essential elements of this dogma.

D.D. Palmer first used the terms “innate” and “educated” (uncapitalized) as adjectives to describe the different components of the nervous system. His discussion of “innate nerves” was roughly synonymous with our idea of the autonomic (unconscious, involuntary) nervous system, while “educated nerves” refer to that portion of the nervous system under voluntary control. However, by not later than 1906 the father of chiropractic had converted these adjectives into nouns, more precisely, proper names. In subsequent elaborations, II was proposed as a fraction of Universal Intelligence (God) who controlled the individual’s biological functions through the medium of the nervous system.^{3,4} However, Palmer’s is not the only interpretation of II.⁵

What are we to think of II? Is this a legitimate metaphysical proposition, a worthy basis for the science and art of chiropractic? Is there a justifiable place for concepts like II in a discipline which seeks legitimacy and advancements in knowledge by means of critical thinking and empirical evidence? The answer, I suggest, depends upon what is meant by II, and at least four major meanings (and several derivatives) are available to us. These include II as a synonym for homeostasis, II as a label for our ignorance, II as a vitalistic explanation of life, and II as a metaphysical assumption.

1. Innate as synonym for homeostasis

Many chiropractors consider II an alternate designation for homeostasis. In this sense, II is a *descriptive* term which refers to an ontological characteristic of living things, all the way from lowly life forms like amoebas,

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viruses to the more complex organisms we call humans. An ontological characteristic is a fundamental or irreducible property of a thing. For instance, one of the ontological properties of magnets is demonstrated by sprinkling them with iron filings and watching for the resulting patterns formed around the magnets' tips. We don't seem to be able to explain magnetism, but we can point to it, and if we find that a supposed magnet fails to arrange iron filings in the expected pattern, we may decide that the object is not a magnet after all. We might even wax poetic and suggest that the "spark of magnetism" has departed the supposed magnet, but in so doing, we haven't explained anything.

Homeostasis is an ontological characteristic of life. Homeostasis doesn't explain life, rather, it is an essential property of biological organisms. The interlocking and reverberating circuits of our physiology collectively comprise life. And in the same poetic vein as before, when we come upon an organism that no longer displays homeostasis, we might opine that the "spark of life" has departed the body. But this is not explanation, merely a more colorful, quaint and poetic mode of description. We cannot explain death by saying the life spirit has departed; we cannot explain life by attributing it to mysterious forces.

To the extent that a doctor's mention of II is synonymous with homeostasis, and to the extent that the DC invokes the II construct as description (but not as explanation), then the expression "II" is not at all inappropriate within scientific discourse. However, there is a problem, in that II is so overburdened with meaning that it's possible for a doctor to mean one thing by II in one sentence (e.g., description), and something quite different in the next breath (e.g., explanation). Indeed, the crossover in meanings may go undetected by the speaker as well as her/his audience. Therefore, it is recommended that when someone uses that term, II, you must ask for a definition in order to understand what is communicated. Please keep in mind that, as the late Stanley Martin, D.C. used to joke: "for every chiropractor there is an equal and opposite chiropractor." Unless a doctor clarifies her/his meaning, there's often no way to be sure what is meant by II.

2. Innate as a label for our ignorance

Another meaning of II is implicit in some of the synonyms doctors use when we reach the limits of our knowledge and understanding. For instance, in the case of a patient who

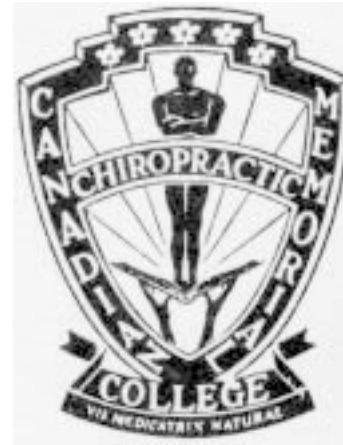


Figure 2 Logo of the CMCC includes the phrase "viz medicatrix naturae".

recovers despite expectations of imminent death, the surgeon may invoke "Mother Nature" or "viz medicatrix naturae" (Latin for the healing power of nature) as a pseudo-explanation. Of course, in such instances nothing has really been explained. In fact, referring to "nature" or "God's will" as an explanation is just another way of saying "we don't know." Attributing what we don't know to a "cause" like II is no explanation at all; to accept such would be to take false pride based on word magic. We cannot explain one mystery (life) by offering another mystery (life force) as its cause.

Innate Intelligence can be a fancy name for our ignorance. Perhaps the label is acceptable, if it serves to remind us of just how much doctors and scientists have to be humble about. If the mention of II, mother nature or the "doctor within" spurs us to further explore the mysteries and complexities of life, then it may be useful. If the mention of II causes us to think more carefully about the details and intricacies of the problems presented by each individual patient, or prompts us to reassess our diagnostic and intervention hypotheses, then it holds strategic clinical value. When recognition of our limited appreciation of the intricacies of patients' problems leads us to adopt a more conservative approach to clinical practice, to try gentler remedies before more invasive methods are employed, then the concept of II has played a useful role. If, on the other hand, the mention of II leads us to adopt a cavalier attitude toward patient care, as manifest in the "pop and pray" tradition or what Oliver Wendell Holmes referred to as the "nature-trusting heresy,"⁶ then it fosters an arrogance which is incongruent with the clinical situation.

The physician of whatever school (allopathic, chiro-

practic, homeopathic, osteopathic) who respects the patient’s self-healing capacity is more likely to seek conservative remedies before attempting more heroic means of intervention. In this sense, II may be seen as a metaphorical reminder and elaboration on the Hippocratic tradition to do no harm, and to first try the least invasive and hazardous remedies. In this scenario, I say “Vive L’Innate!”

3. Innate as vitalistic “explanation”

When physiologist Walter Cannon introduced the concept of homeostasis in his book, *The Wisdom of the Body*,⁷ most readers recognized that the biologist was waxing poetic in his title. However, many folks in chiropractic take the metaphor of wisdom literally, and in so doing engage in a form of bio-theology known as vitalism.

Vitalism is that rejected tradition in biology which proposes that life is sustained and explained by an unmeasurable, intelligent force or energy. The supposed effects of vitalism are the manifestations of life itself, which in turn are the basis for inferring the concept in the first place. This circular reasoning offers pseudo-explanation, and may deceive us into believing we have explained some aspect of biology when in fact we have only labeled our ignorance. “Explaining an unknown (life) with an unknowable (Innate),” suggests philosopher Joseph Donahue, D.C., “is absurd.”

When chiropractors employ II as part of their clinical theory, as indicated by the sequence:

Adjusting → ↓subluxations → ↑II communication →
 ↓disease, ↓symptoms, ↑health

they commit the error of adding an unnecessary and untestable step in causal explanation. Some go so far as to imbue this additional hypothetical construct (↑II communication) with all sorts of magical possibilities. And so we may encounter the doctor who practices as though adjustments were a panacea, good for whatever ails the patient. In B.J.’s time as well as our own, there are DCs who disparage diagnosis on the grounds that “II knows more than any diagnosing fool.” The clinical task for the chiropractor in this scenario is very clear and very simple: find a subluxation, adjust it, and II takes care of the rest. But for the scientist, II as hypothetical construct is super-

fluous; we can do just as well (or better) without it:

Adjusting → ↓subluxations → ↓disease,
 ↓symptoms, ↑health

Vitalism has many faces and has sprung up in many areas of scientific inquiry. Psychologist B.F. Skinner, for example, pointed out the irrationality of attributing behavior to mental states and traits.⁸ Such “mental way stations,” he argued, amount to excess theoretical baggage which fails to advance cause-and-effect explanations by substituting an unfathomable psychology of “mind.” The concept of the homunculus similarly provides a useless

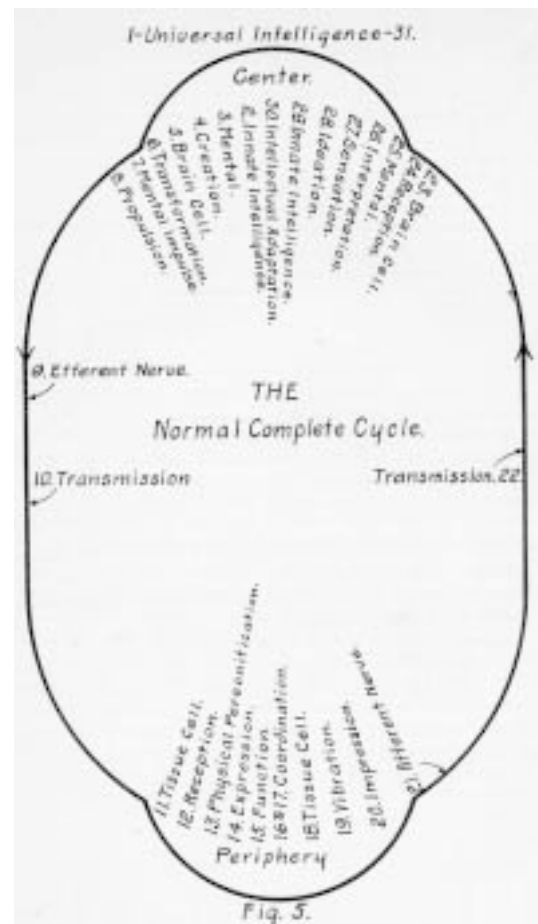


Figure 3 Ralph W. Stephenson, D.C.’s “Normal Complete Cycle,” suggesting the relationship between Universal Intelligence, Innate Intelligence and human physiology¹¹, p. 11.

explanation of biology by proposing a little man inside the man who pulls the levers of biological function. Once the little man inside has been accepted, one must propose a little man inside the little man who further determines the behavior of the homunculus. There is no logical endpoint to this line of thinking, and it serves no useful purpose.

Vitalism in chiropractic, that is, II, has several variants. For instance, D.D. Palmer believed that the unseen Innate spirit (again, a fraction of Universal Intelligence or God), existed throughout the body and was able to exert its beneficial control of human function through any nerve ganglion.⁹ The founder prided himself on developing a science that united the “material and the immaterial,” and held that his theosophy was not religion, because it was

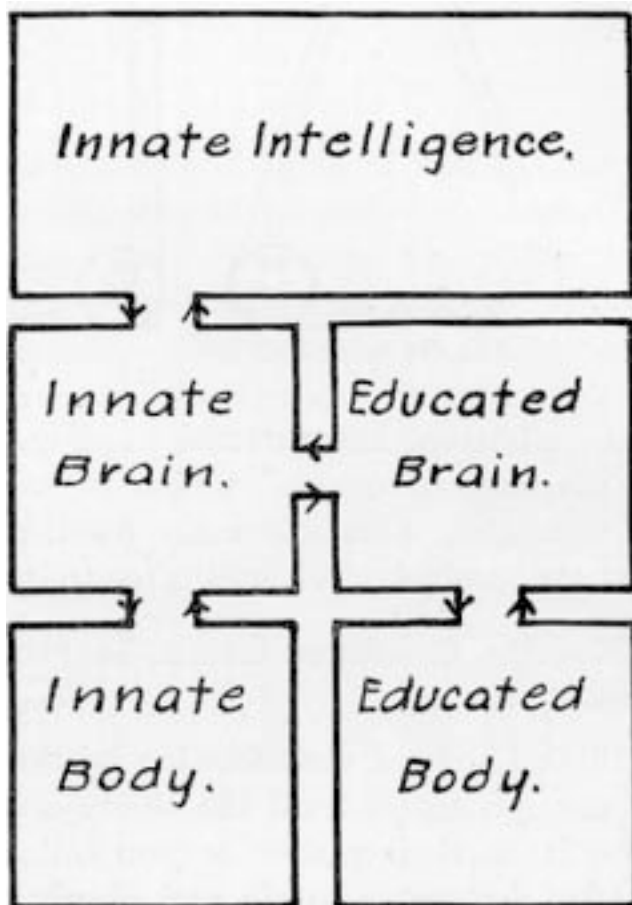


Figure 4 “The most valuable drawing in the world – for it solves *all* the problems of man” (B.J. Palmer, quoted in ¹²); the diagram originally appeared in Stephenson’s^{11, p. 10} *Chiropractic Textbook*.

non-denominational. B.J. Palmer, on the other hand, located the II in the brain, but like his father, conceived of it as a fraction of the Almighty. T.F. Ratledge, D.C., founder of what became the Cleveland Chiropractic College of Los Angeles, also thought of II as synonymous with “brainpower”,¹⁰ but avoided spiritual or theological connections.

B.J. Palmer applauded the expositions on II offered by his faculty member, Ralph W. Stephenson, D.C. Stephenson’s *Chiropractic Textbook*¹¹ gave rise to a complex of theories regarding this Vital Being, and to derivative discussions that leave this writer amazed and incredulous. For example, Joseph B. Strauss, D.C., former president of the Pennsylvania College of Straight Chiropractic, refuses to personify or spiritualize the vital entity (he offers an aspiritual spirit).^{13, p. 38} On the other hand, Dr. Strauss takes up the question of whether the human fetus is guided by its own “innate intelligence” or that of the mother.^{13, pp. 18–20} Elsewhere, Dr. Strauss considers the “intelligence” of the universe, the “innate intelligence” of chickens, and the “organ intelligence” of chicken hearts that have been removed from the bird.¹⁴ One is tempted to ponder how many Innates might dance on the head of a pin.

Others have made II the center of their advertising and marketing efforts (see Figure 5).

4. Innate as metaphysical premise

Some chiropractors seek to preserve the II construct by offering the vitalism of Innate as an a priori, metaphysical assumption, rather than as a hypothetical construct. For example, Palmer Chiropractic University offers as its first and most basic tenet that “life is intelligent.” In this sense, II might mean something akin to holism. As a reminder to think multi-factorially, to construe patients’ problems in terms of multiple interacting systems within the person and her/his surrounding environment, and as an exhortation to take the patient’s point of view and motivations into account, this meaning of Innate deserves applause. However, I can see no advantage to proposing an Intelligent Spirit, when a bio-psychosocial model of the patient will serve the same purpose. We may well acknowledge that the “whole is greater than the sum of its parts,” but this does not mean that the whole is an intelligent, purposive, benevolent being that dwells within us. Palmer University’s first tenet opens the door to all sorts of magical possibilities. Do you remember that old TV commercial

1923—PHOToplay MAGAZINE—ADVERTISING SECTION 143

What Do Chiropractors Mean by Innate Intelligence?

THE temperature of a normal human body is approximately 98.5 degrees. You may sit in a room the temperature of which is 55 degrees, or go out of doors when the thermometer registers zero and your temperature, if you are in health, will not vary a single degree, because, resident in your body is an intelligence that generates, distributes and regulates the heat of the body, and instantaneously adapts it to the change in temperature.

If you start in June to take a plunge in the lake every morning and continue it every day until December, this same power resident in the body will intelligently adapt the body to the seasonal change in temperature.

This innate power gave the polar bear his long hair, that he might live in the land of eternal ice, and the gentle deer his speed, that he might escape his less swift fox. It is this power that is the struggle for existence gave wings to the birds and cunning to the fox, spots to the leopard and strength to the lion. It is this power that elongated the neck of the giraffe so that he could reach the high-hanging foods and for obvious reasons weakened the feet of the duck and goose. This inborn power adapted the stomach of the carnivora to a meat diet, the stomach of the herbivora to a vegetable diet, and the stomach of man to both.

maintains its vigor and then slowly lets the hours in which we live decay. During all the fleeting three-score years and ten it coordinates the physical functions, seals the body's wounds, sends its breaks, adapts it to the change of season, occupation and pursuit and performs the miracle of changing coarse food into living, breathing, sensitive bone and flesh.


It boggles at all our efforts to locate it or to imitate the work and yic-some people, because they cannot feel it, weigh it or measure it, question its existence and say "Vital force is a chemical phenomenon."

Call it what you will, it's there—a rose by any other name is just as sweet.


This "power within" Chiropractors call Innate Intelligence and all their philosophy, science and art is built upon this fundamental fact. They teach that "Innate Intelligence" functions through the brain and nervous system, and that disease is but the abnormal expression of one or more of the nine primary physical functions. Any pressure of a harder tissue (bone) upon the soft nervous tissue, impairs the conductivity (function or work) of that tissue and results in disease. All that is necessary for a complete restoration to health, is that the impinging tissue be adjusted to normal position, which permits the nerve again to function normally.

Scientists call the process operated of the "power within" the law of adaptation. Among the professions engaged in getting the sick well, chiropractors alone recognize the existence of the thing itself, and the law of its expression, through the nervous system.

That is the reason Chiropractic succeeds where other methods fail.



HUMAN - BRAIN - OR SYMPATHIC



DEFINITION

The power of Innate Intelligence is the power of the organism to adjust itself to the conditions of the world around it, and to maintain its normal position for the purpose of securing the greatest results.

Write for information regarding Chiropractors or Schools to the

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Figure 5 A 1923 advertisement from *Photoplay* magazine features Innate Intelligence.

for peanut butter which claimed: "If you like peanuts, you'll love Skippy"? In a similar vein, I suggest that "If you like miracles, you'll love Innate!" But as a metaphysical premise for a science of chiropractic, II offers no incremental utility, no added value.

Implications of chiropractic vitalism

Some chiropractors have proposed less theologically based versions of vitalism, for instance, by likening the vital force to electricity or substituting the idea of "nerve force" for II.¹⁵ On the other hand, Thurman Fleet, D.C.,

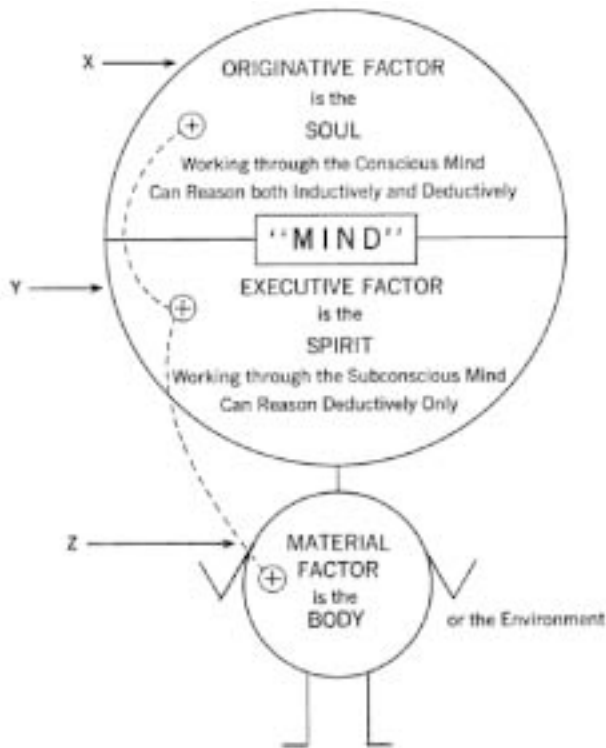


Figure 6 Concept-Therapy “stickman” diagram of the structure of personality.

founder of Concept-Therapy,¹⁶ developed what might be described as a form of psychotherapy based upon the Innate concept, while retaining something of D.D. Palmer’s notions of “spirit” and “soul.” Jimmy Parker, D.C., a student of Dr. Fleet in the 1950s, founder of the Parker Seminars in the 1950s and founder of Parker College in the late 1970s, elaborated upon Fleet’s “stickman” diagram of human personality to create his notion of “Infinite Oneness.” With Innate, I suppose, all things are possible.

Non-verbal communication between the II of the doctor and the II of the patient has also been suggested. The late Richard Van Rumpt, D.C., founder of the “Directional Non-Force Technique” (DNFT), devised a method of assessment in which the chiropractor mentally asks the patient’s II to indicate the location of subluxations while the patient lies prone. The doctor then observes for leg-length changes, which is II’s means of communication.¹⁷ Others have opined that II is “quite mechanical and more or less synonymous with Subconscious Mind” (Harrison, quoted in 5). My friend, Fred Barge, D.C., former president of the

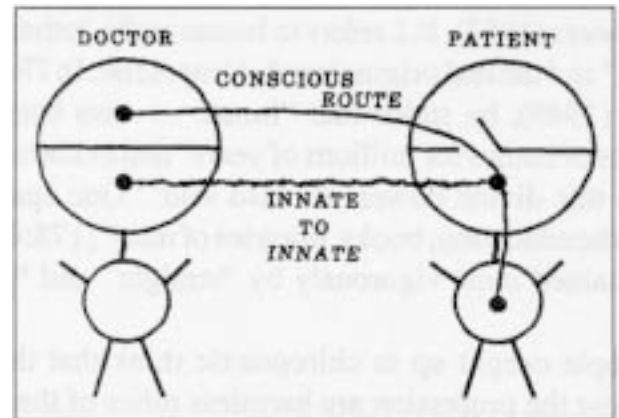


Figure 7 Illustration of “Innate to Innate” communication.

International Chiropractors’ Association and the author of *One Cause, One Cure*, attributes the “Cause” of all disease to “The body’s inability to comprehend itself and/or its environment”.¹⁸ Such “weaker” forms of vitalism nonetheless offer a purposive, immaterial being, an anthropomorphization if not a deification of biological “cause.” And, as suggested earlier, many DCs confuse Innate-the-explanation with the descriptive concept of homeostasis. This amounts to leaving health care in the hands of the angels.



Figure 8 A vision of Innate Intelligence?

Chiropractors are not unique in recognizing a tendency and capacity for self-repair and auto-regulation of human physiology. But we surely stick out like a sore thumb among professions which claim to be scientifically based by our unrelenting commitment to vitalism. So long as we propound the “One cause, one cure” rhetoric of Innate, we should expect to be met by ridicule from the wider health science community. Chiropractors can’t have it both ways. Our theories cannot be both dogmatically held vitalistic constructs and be scientific at the same time. The purposiveness, consciousness¹⁹ and rigidity of the Palmers’ Innate should be rejected.

Now, I can’t tell you with any certainty that there’s no such thing, or no such Person, or no such Persons as II, any more than I can state with certainty that there is or is not a God (or if you prefer, Universal Intelligence). Belief in “immaterial” intelligences is a matter of faith, not of science. What I can say with some certainty is that such concepts have no constructive role to play within the realm of natural philosophy. Innate Intelligence fails as a hypothetical construct because it is not testable, and fails as a metaphysical assumption in that it has not been productive in any unique way in the generation of testable hypotheses. Nevertheless, II may be true, on some spiritual level. On the other hand, I’m reminded of a comment from a well-known chiro-basher, H.L. Mencken, who suggested that:

For every complex problem there is a solution which is simple, direct, and wrong.

So, I’ll end here, and leave you with this query: what do you mean by Innate?

Acknowledgments

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