

Prescience, Genetic Memory, and Personal Identity in Frank Herbert's Dune Trilogy

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"Any road followed precisely to its end leads precisely nowhere. Climb the mountain just a little bit to test that it's a mountain. From the top of the mountain, you cannot see the mountain"([Herbert](#), Dune 68).

–Bene Gesserit Proverb

Ben Bova begins his liner notes on Frank Herbert Reads his God Emperor of Dune (Excerpts) by stating that "All truly great art shares this characteristic: the more you study it, the more it reveals" (Herbert). Although it refers specifically to the fourth book in the Dune Chronicles, his statement also applies to the trilogy that precedes it–Dune, Dune Messiah, and Children of Dune. Herbert's "polyphonic" work contains themes on so many levels (ecology, politics, war, philosophy, religion, and technology, just to name a few), that it soon becomes difficult to separate one from the other. The topic of human awareness, however, takes on a specific tone and special level of importance above all the others.

Whether looking at the Bene Gesserit sisterhood and their political intrigues and planning, or the Mentat's historical role as the human computer 1 , filing away and analyzing countless bits of data, human awareness somehow always becomes a focus. Even in the economics of the work, where the "coin of the realm," the spice melange, is able not only to extend human life, but also to open up both past and future to the properly prepared mind, does this theme become evident.

With all of his attention on the awareness of humanity, however, Herbert had more common and more difficult questions on his mind. By creating a character, Paul Atreides, who is able to see not only into the future, but also into the past lives that made up his long list of ancestors, the questions of personal and societal [identity](#) are brought forward. These powers, which Herbert refers to as "prescience" and "genetic [memory](#)," respectively, give Paul so much knowledge that he is no longer able to function as an individual. He finds himself limited to certain actions because he knows the outcomes. Once on top of the mountain, so to speak, he can no longer see where he stands. In turn, Paul's son Leto II and daughter Ghanima, as well as his sister Alia, are also forced to deal with the issues of such knowledge in the entirely different light of "Abomination," a condition that befalls those whose inherited memories are unearthed before they are born.

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