

Personality

WHAT MAKES YOU THE WAY YOU ARE

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Introduction

I do not plead guilty to a shallow view of human nature, when I propose to apply, as it were, a foot-rule to its heights and depths.

Francis Galton

Lee is a successful, smart, business executive, rising 35 and rising through the ranks at the same time. He is considered effective and dynamic at work. In fact, it's more than that. He does not suffer fools gladly, and if he thinks colleagues or suppliers are trying to pull one over on him, he is quick to speak his mind. He can be very cutting, and fly into a deep rage, during which he will tell people what he thinks of them and their behaviour without sparing their blushes. As a result, though he is good at what he does, he builds up enemies. He has moved firms a few times, or had to be moved between departments, because he gets into feuds and stand-offs. Some more conciliatory colleague will have to step in to calm the waters, or simply to ensure that Lee and his latest enemy don't have to deal with each other.

Outside of work, there are quite a lot of people Lee doesn't like. He has been to a fair few exotic countries, and for at least some of these, he has decided that he hates the natives. They are too rude, or too slow, or invade his personal space. He hates people who cut him up on the road, or barge in front of him in line, or make him wait. He is quick to get angry when this happens, and not averse to a muttered, usually scatological, insult. We should not assume that Lee doesn't like to socialize. In fact, he loves to go out and party. However, if the people at the party are the wrong type of people, or they are partying in the wrong way, he is quickly bored and frankly annoyed at having wasted his evening. Even a good party might end up with Lee in a screaming row with some fool who doesn't share his politics or tastes.

Lee has a core of good friends, and these friendships have lasted, but they are not without conflict. In fact, in each, there is a history of strong arguments, altercations, and sulks, as well as reconciliations. Love is a similar story. There always seem to be disagreements, or the other person turns out to be needy, annoying, or inadequate in some way. Women tend to end up saying Lee is selfish, or inconsiderate, and a partner who is compatible for the long haul is still not in sight.

Julian is very different from Lee. He is (currently) a writer for a travel magazine. This job allows him to travel all over the world, researching stories on Indian religious festivals and the Trans-Siberian Railway. Travel is his current passion,

though it was not always so. He studied music at college, and immediately after graduation threw himself with passion into his band, which performed an unusual combination of traditional Middle Eastern music and modern pop. Guided mainly by his motivating enthusiasm, the band did quite well in their region for a few years, though doing quite well in the music business is not as glamorous as it might seem. It means playing live, a lot, but to maybe thirty or fifty people, and sleeping in vans and sharing flats with numerous others of uncertain hygiene. These costs are not to be questioned, though, since music is clearly everything.

A couple of years into the life of the band, Julian began to become disillusioned, and for a period became low and withdrawn. He felt that his life with his partner, one of the band's Lebanese backing singers, was becoming repetitive and joyless, and he worried about what would happen to them in the end. What had previously seemed incredibly exciting flipped into seeming like a treadmill on which they would never get anywhere. Julian eventually left both the band and his partner and, much to the surprise of his friends, enrolled in a Master's degree in business management. Julian, the rock and roller, in a business suit? Julian would have none of it. Business is *really* interesting. It's about people, it's about how they interact. In fact, it's *creative*. It's a way of bringing about new relationships and better ways of living.

Needless to say, that didn't last. By the time of graduation, Julian could only see the entrapment of thirty years of 9-to-5 working in an office ahead of him. This time he became really depressed, and saw both a doctor, who prescribed antidepressants, and a counsellor, who introduced him to some of the more New Age elements of psychotherapy. For a while he made his living, with his then girlfriend, doing Reiki, psychodrama, and Indian head massage, the two of them living frugally but healthily in a large rambling farmhouse in a remote spot. They didn't need foreign holidays, so vivifying and healthy was the way they lived all year around.

That lasted three years, until a rift with his partner, and disillusion with the therapies he was practising, led Julian into his glummiest spirits yet. He resolved to travel the world for a year, to revitalize himself, and through a series of chance encounters, ended up writing features for the travel magazine. He loves his job—he has been doing it for a year—and has a fabulous French girlfriend, who is a photographer. Clearly, travelling and travel writing is what he has always been working towards.

Their lives are so different, Lee and Julian, and yet they are the same age and sex. We can easily imagine them both coming from fairly normal middle-class backgrounds, being of similar intelligence and educational attainment, and having been exposed to broadly similar cultural expectations and values. In fact, it is no stretch of the imagination, given our

experience of human beings, to imagine two people having essentially the same set of experiences growing up, and yet having adult lives at least as different from each other as those of Lee and Julian. If the initial social conditions were so similar, then what could possibly account for two human lives coming out so differently?

Non-psychologists I talk to have strong intuitions about this question. What brings about the different outcomes is, they say, the different personalities, or temperaments, or characters, of the two individuals involved. What is personality, I ask? They tell me that it is something internal, stable, inherent to the person, something which stands in a causal relationship to their specific choices, motivations, reactions, and obstacles when faced with the stream of events. A clue to personality being at work, they tell me, is a kind of thematic recurrence within the events of a life. For example, over the course of a few years, Lee eventually ends up hostile about most of the people he has to work with. In the same way, he is quite likely to end up being hostile about someone he has to sit next to on a train journey or flight. The timescale is quite different, and the stakes and demands of the interaction are very different, but the fact that, sooner or later, another person in close proximity is likely to do something to annoy him, recurs as a *leitmotif* across Lee's life. (A *leitmotif* I suspect Lee will never consider, since he finds psychologists and psychology books really annoying.)

Similarly for Julian, there are a number of recurring patterns. Each of the domains of fusion music, psychodrama, self-sufficient farm living, and travel writing is unusual and creative, but Julian has been drawn to them all within a short life. It is as if there is a constant quest for new ways of experiencing the world and expressing his experience of it. There is also a characteristic pattern to his life choices. He finds a new domain and becomes tremendously, infectiously excited and activated by it. This serves him very well in getting his new projects established. For a while, he simply will not hear of the drawbacks or limitations. Over time, though, these feelings fade, and in place of enthusiasm come doubt and worry about the future, for despite his energy, Julian can be a very worried and sad person.

The pattern that describes Julian's career activities also describes his relationships. These have typically lasted two or three years, and consisted of an initial phase of great passion, during which his family's mild suggestions of unsuitability are just *so* ridiculous, unintuitive, and superficial, followed by a period of mounting unhappiness, restlessness, and withdrawal, during which his family's resigned attempts to get on with his chosen paramour are resented. ('How can they not see that she is not what I need?' It is the lot of parents to always be in the wrong.) This phase is followed by a period of more or less nervy adjustment and recuperation, before the next passion takes hold.

Can this *leitmotif* of initial enthusiasm, followed by withdrawal and denial, be detected at any other level? As I imagine him, Julian has dozens of unopened books that he brought home from the book shop with a triumphant ‘Nietzsche is *so* interesting. I am going to read everything he ever wrote’. There is a bread maker, bought in a flurry of excitement but used twice, a violin, played once, and a full-sized loom(!) Each of these items represents a spurt of enthusiasm and a desire to begin something unusual, followed by either insufficient reward to sustain the behaviour, or a slough of demotivating negative emotion. This is the same pattern as the relationships and jobs, but over a different scale.

The same pattern appearing at different scales is a very interesting property. It is, for example, a property of those exquisite topographies called fractals much beloved of complexity theorists and graphic designers. In a fractal, you see the same pattern whether you look at a very large section or whether you zoom in on a very small one. The part represents the whole, and vice versa. Fractals have this property because of the nature of the mathematical functions that generate them.

Human personalities are rather like fractals. It is not just that what we do in the large-scale narratives of our lives—love, career, friendships—tends to be somewhat consistent over time, with us often repeating the same kinds of

triumphs or mistakes. Rather, what we do in tiny interactions like the way we shop, or dress, or talk to a stranger on a train, or decorate our houses, shows the same kinds of patterns as can be observed from examining a whole life. We often find ourselves saying, ‘That is just so typical of Bob . . .’. We say this because what people do in the set of situations we have observed them in is a reasonable guide to what they will do in a set of future situations, including quite different ones. Just as the self-consistent properties of fractals are generated by the mathematical functions that define them, so the self-consistent properties of personality seem as if they are generated by some physical property of the nervous system of the person in question. In other words, we feel that talking about someone’s personality is a shorthand way for talking about the way that person’s particular nervous system is wired up.¹

This book is about the psychology of personality. I aim to vindicate the idea that people have enduring personality dispositions which partly predict what they will do, and which stem from the way their nervous systems are wired up. I also wish to introduce the science behind the study of personality—how we measure personality, what the measures mean, what they predict, and why personality variation exists in the first place. Personality psychology has, until recently, had a rather low status compared to other branches of psychology. It has been perceived as based on flimsy evidence, internally divided, and far removed from the ‘hard

science' end of psychology. There may once have been some justice in these views, but I believe that things have changed. In fact, a renaissance is underway in the study of personality, a renaissance I hope to herald in this book.

There are several reasons why the time is right for the renaissance. First, we at last have a set of personality concepts we can use that is firmly based on evidence, and which we psychologists can agree on. This set of concepts is called the five-factor model of personality, or the big five. The five-factor model has emerged from a welter of research over the last few decades and looks to be the most comprehensive, reliable and useful framework for discussing human personality that we have ever had (Chapter 1). The idea of the model is that there are five major dimensions along which all human characters vary. Thus, any individual can be given five scores that will tell us a great deal about the ways they are liable to behave through their lives.

The emergence of the five-factor model is very useful, because the field of personality research had long been plagued by different people using different notions. Formerly, one psychologist might give you a score for Reward Dependence and Harm Avoidance, whilst another might classify you as a Thinking, Feeling, Sensing, or Intuiting type. This led to a frustrating profusion of different studies measuring different constructs without seeming to relate to each other in any systematic way. All this added to the low status of

personality research as a scientific endeavour. As long ago as 1958, Gordon Allport complained that ‘each assessor has his own pet units and uses a pet battery of diagnostic devices’, and things got worse in the ensuing decades.²

The five-factor model introduced some order into the mess. It’s not that all those other constructs were necessarily invalid. It’s just that most constructs that had previously been measured can actually be subsumed under the five-factor framework—either they measure one of the big five, or a sub-part of one of them, or an amalgam of two of them. This is enormously useful, as we can quickly tidy the field up very significantly, and give people a fully portable framework for understanding and characterizing the main differences between people. To quote the influential personality psychologists Paul Costa and Robert McCrae, the five-factor model is the ‘Christmas tree’ on which all the particular findings of personality research can be arranged. I am using the five-factor model as my Christmas tree in this book too: each one of the big five is the subject of one chapter (Chapters 3 to 7 inclusive).³

Another reason that we are ready for a renaissance of personality studies is the staggering progress of neuroscience, fuelled in particular by brain-imaging techniques such as PET scanning and fMRI, which we will meet frequently later in the book. These techniques allow us to look at the structure and functioning of the human brain non-invasively

in alive, awake, thinking individuals. The first flurry of activity using these new technologies was about finding out how brains *in general* worked—which regions were always associated with which types of functions—but a second phase has become concerned with the variation between individuals. Different brain structures have different relative sizes within the ‘normal’ population, and there is a great deal of variation between individuals in the way their brains respond metabolically to particular tasks. A new science is emerging of individual differences in brain structure and functioning, and the results of this science can be mapped back to the big five personality dimensions, as we shall see.

The third area contributing to the renaissance of interest in personality is human genetics and genomics. The sequencing of the human genome was completed in 2001. Just as in brain imaging, the first concern was understanding people in general, not as individuals. The initial goal of the human genome project was thus to describe the common structure of the 25–30,000 genes that we all share, and was based on a ‘consensus’ sequence of around two hundred individuals’ DNA. The consensus sequence has now been published, and there is a growing interest in genetic individuality. Many of those 25–30,000 genes exist in several slightly different variant forms. We know that people vary enormously in disease liabilities, response to particular drugs, vulnerability to specific types of psychological problems, and many other ways, and we

are beginning to understand how these predispositions relate to which of the possible genetic variants they are carrying. We all know our blood group, and, in the not too distant future, we can envisage a world in which we will get our personal genome sequenced, in order to know our vulnerability to breast cancer or heart disease, or likely response to a particular type of drug. This burgeoning science of genetic individuality can also be linked back to personality, since, as we shall see, your personality is partly determined by which genetic variants you are carrying.

The final reason why the time is right for a personality renaissance is to do with the diffusion of evolutionary thinking. Evolutionary thinking is about asking the ultimate question of how the population got to be the way it is through natural selection, alongside the proximate question of which genes or bits of brain are involved. Evolutionary thinking is becoming much more widespread in psychology, and it is lending a new depth and explanatory power to several different areas of the field. Just as in the other areas of science discussed above, the initial concern of evolutionary psychologists was with understanding the design of the mental mechanisms we all share, and so at first, they gave relatively little thought to differences between individuals. Only a few small forays of evolutionary thought into the psychology of personality were made. However, that is also changing. We know that there are temperamental differences

between individuals in species other than humans. An evolutionary perspective on such variation raises a host of good questions. Why is the variation there? Will natural selection ultimately eliminate it, or lead to its increase? Under what circumstances, indeed, does natural selection allow variation to persist within a population? These questions will infuse our thinking about personality traits throughout this book.⁴

This book is aimed at the interested general reader, rather than just my academic colleagues. In this spirit, I will not dwell on the kinds of technical details and full background to every claim that would normally be found in a research paper or monograph. Those wishing to find citations and ancillary details are directed to the endnotes, though even these offer pointers and key references rather than a complete literature review. Those who can live without the academic stuff should be able to ignore the notes completely without missing anything vital to the argument. Even in this (hopefully) user-friendly presentation, I will try to give a judicious and evidence-based account of current knowledge, and be fair in separating what we know from what is as yet guesswork. My account is based on several elements: the existing literature, created by many esteemed colleagues; some recent personality studies of my own; and a remarkable set of life stories sent to me by correspondents from all over the world. These were individuals who had been participants in my research, and for whom I thus had five-factor personality data. At my

request, they kindly wrote to me—often at length—about their lives, their feelings, and their relationships with others in ways that have been most enlightening, even if they have sometimes made writing this book harder, rather than easier, since they make the picture more complex. Where I draw on their stories, I have of course disguised details to ensure their anonymity. (By the way, Lee and Julian are not examples of these life stories. They are the only fictional case studies in this book. The rest are drawn from life.)

I solicited the life stories because I suspected that most readers of this book were more interested in understanding people than in understanding personality theory for theory's sake. Above all, if you are reading this, I suspect you want to know about and understand your own personality. I would therefore urge you to turn to the Appendix and score yourself using the Newcastle Personality Assessor before we go any further and you know too much about what is riding on your answers. You may like to have your scores to hand as you read the subsequent chapters, especially Chapters 3 to 7, where we meet the big five one by one. Before we can meet them, though, we have to explore a couple of preliminary but vital issues: first, in Chapter 1, what is a personality trait; and then, in Chapter 2, why does evolution allow biological differences between individuals of the same species to persist?