

Freewheelin'

Random thoughts on type, the self and personality

Peter Geyer

Peter Geyer has been called “one of the deepest thinkers in the world on the MBTI and its uses.” In the first of a series of articles, he sets out his thinking on personality, the self and psychological type, as conceived variously by C.G. Jung, Isabel Myers and in the MBTI.

- ① Can you follow?
Now that the trace is fainter in the sand
Try turning your face to the wall ...
- ② Can you still read me?
Now that the chase is wilder in your hand
Try losing your place in the sun.
- ③ All the praises of the dream
Turned to tangles in the trees ...
All yesterday's fine chariots
Turned to buses in the street ...

– Jack Bruce & Pete Brown
- ④ What will happen in the morning when the world it gets so crowded
That you can't look out the window in the morning?

– Nick Drake
- ⑤ We from New Orl'ns, 'n' we like to do what we wanna do ... so we gonna do it!

– Dr John

a. On having ‘personality’

Some time ago I was passing through US Customs and Immigration, on my way to various places in that country, and I was asked what I did and my purpose in seeking to enter the USA. While a standard and reasonable enough question for such border authorities to ask – and one that I had asked a few times as a sometime member of the Australian Customs Service – the negative implications of an inadequate answer seem more tangible with those protecting the USA.

It's as though you are seeking to enter the Promised Land, where everyone would naturally wish to be. For an Australian citizen this idea is curious, to say the least. So, when the response to my reply of “I teach people about personality” was, “Do I have a personality?”, I declined to directly respond, observing that a reply of any sort might get me into trouble. A hearty laugh and approved entry was the response, to my quiet relief.

One of the things I couldn't say to this person was that that wasn't the sort of “personality” I was talking about at all. He was of course employing the general use of the term, one that's conflated somewhat with aspects of extraversion. It's probably more directly related to the celebrity status of “personalities”, in Western culture at least.

Actors and politicians come readily to mind, as well as sports stars. Their “personality” comes from their actions and the sound-bite – in general, how they respond to media questions and responses. That's nothing to do with type, unless you want to make an examination of the type preferences of people who have facilitated this ludicrous means of “communicating” – and that may not help you much either.

As a consequence of this perspective on personality, there's a well-distributed presumption that people can take this mask on and off at will (somewhat as actors do), and so you can "reinvent" yourself. I must confess to searching hard for indications of such a metamorphosis in anyone, but without success to date. Once again, how seriously you can take this with respect to politicians, for instance, also begs the question as to whether media workers are convinced of this possibility. Perhaps it's easier to think that way. It doesn't seem to take much thought, anyway.

Clearly, in any case, the notion of a continuous personality, with various aspects of it displayed to others from time to time is foreign to this sort of view. Philosophically, it's both post-modern ("there is no self") and common-sense ("what you see is what you get"; "adapt to situations as they arise"). This particular point of view or approach to life comes up every so often in giving type feedback and teaching type. Many people are unaware of their internal consistencies, even if it's the Eichmann Defence ("I was only following orders") and so words like "conditioning."

The notion of reinvention also has its own pressures – you can be anyone you want to be so you can be anyone others want you to be – a boundaryless world. It may also be one of the reasons why 'Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder' has entered our vocabulary. Isabel Myers once stated that the hardest thing for anyone to develop is good judgement. As judgement implies boundaries (yes/no; right/wrong; stop/go etc.) this can be stressful and confusing for both Js and Ps, who both need boundaries, but at different personal distances. Type dynamics tells us also that whatever we prefer in the outer world, healthy development of a judging function is essential for our well-being as a personality.

b. Biography and the self

The self as a concept denies or circumscribes reinvention. Paradoxically, getting at the self may mean finding a way through a miasma of personal statements and presentations. A good example of this fog over the road is the field of biography.

Adam Phillips and Arnold M Ludwig have recently written eloquently on the biographical aspects of the self: Phillips, in his customary fluid but dense narrative style. on Freud's aversion to biography (1999); and Ludwig in an engaging examination of biographies and biographers (1997). Neither of these men takes a Jungian perspective, although Ludwig refers to Jung briefly in passing, and his framework is compatible with such a view in many ways.

It's unclear what sort of self Phillips is interested in, other than expounding on psychoanalytic principles, which is a worthwhile project in itself – but its language and precepts produce its own dry ice, adding an element of mystery to the topic that may not actually be there. Ludwig, on the other hand, likes the idea of self. Part of the role of his book is to point out how difficult it can be in many cases for a person to establish one, as well as how various therapeutic models and methods can lead a person up many paths, some of which are cul-de-sacs. This is a useful caution and reminder to all users of personality frameworks.

There are other themes, but Phillips in part wants to talk about the various Sigmund Freuds (in a biographical sense) in the context of his wish to deprive any potential biographer of hard data, by destroying documents and proscribing the writing of a biography. Paradoxically, in terms of what Freud contributed to knowledge, he did not want to be known by others, seeking to edit his own life for onlookers. Although this project was, naturally, doomed to failure, particularly after Freud's death, Phillips seeks to capture the dilemma we have of how we wish to be known by others and "tampering with the evidence of ourselves" in order to push a particular view.

Former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser showed some aspects of this on ABC television recently (2000). In the process of an extremely interesting interview, in which he

articulated the social contract implied by Liberal Party founder R.G. Menzies and its decline or loss in today's Party, Fraser gracefully and firmly declined to be drawn on some quite interesting questions about how he saw the current leadership of the Liberal Party, and how they saw him. There are virtues in circumspection; these, however, do not spike speculation and judgement on what was left unsaid. In doing so, he presented the contemporary paradox of a somewhat private man who has spent a life in the public eye.

Notwithstanding, then, Jung's identification of Freud's psychology as extraverted, the reserve and distrust of external interpretations mark Freud, like Malcolm Fraser, as clearly an introverted type (IS_J?); and for Freud perhaps, as Jung speculated in later life, "an introverted feeling type, with inferior thinking", captured by extraverted thinking (1975). Jung here is implying that Freud's psychology comes out of his inferior function. That perspective of course may only work if you're not inclined to rate Freud highly as an objective thinker – which was Jung's expressed point of view.

Walter Kaufmann (1997), for instance, a strong supporter of Freud, queries Jung's ideas strongly on the basis of his projections regarding Freud – amongst other things, particularly that his type theory was developed in order to explain Freud's ideas. Kaufmann's points are worth taking on board for some context about those turbulent times. However, I must admit Jung's speculation makes some sense to me, in which case we're looking at Freud's type being INFP or ISFP, probably the former. Something to think about, anyway.

Ludwig's view doesn't lead us to Freud, or to Jung for that matter, but to some interesting speculation on personality, particularly from a typewatching perspective. If we typewatch, i.e. observe what people say and do and apply a type preference to that, we are in the realm of hypothesis (other personality theories might be more certain), because we can't be certain as to why a person has acted as they have unless we ask them. Extra data may in fact result in a changing of hypothesis (e.g. was Mother Theresa INFP, as I once thought, or INTJ, following data from someone who was involved in the work of her order of nuns?).

Because Ludwig doesn't use type, it enables him to speculate on what various people think personality is. Apart from the variety of presumptions that he gleans from the many biographers he interviews, his insightful comparisons between different biographies about the same person certainly raise some interesting issues, particularly with the various *personae* of Marilyn Monroe. He shows that the many biographies of this tragic figure are often completely contradictory. He also skilfully leads the reader along the trail of pathologising Monroe's reported behaviour by presenting data in a particular order, and pointing out that another set of data about the same person might produce a different result. This is a *caveat emptor* for all of us who like to speculate about the types of celebrities or personalities.

A major point for Ludwig seems to be that there can be many ways for anyone to describe themselves and still adhere to the same core self, or what he might refer to as "the capacity of the self to reflect upon its inner workings", to construct its own narrative or personal story. Looking for consistencies in that narrative might be futile or, from a counselling perspective, unhelpful and unnecessary other than to encourage the completion of the narrative. From Ludwig's data on Marilyn Monroe, for instance, I would speculate that she preferred INFP; at the same time, that mightn't be a useful diagnosis for helping her or predicting her behaviour; it may be a useful explanation for what she did. In many ways, that's what type is all about.

c. C.G. Jung, Isabel Myers and the MBTI

I said earlier that the effort of trying to explain something about Freud led Jung to his particular formulation of the idea of psychological types, and consequently to apply it to humanity at large. Notwithstanding criticisms by Kaufmann and many others with respect to its origin and use, the idea of psychological types seems to be one of Jung's best ideas. It was

a compass he never wished to abandon, and something he never stopped using as a help to understand or explain something about a person.

When we take the perspective of users of Isabel Myers' adaptation of that idea, in the form of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, there can be a tendency to dismiss or forget the origins of Jung's idea, his intentions, and the implications for anyone of taking up a view of personality at variance with surrounding scholarship on personality, even today. In some ways, the heroic journey of Myers' work in developing the MBTI, particularly in the intellectual context of the world of psychological instruments, can blind us to key issues in comprehending the nature of personality as a whole and the questions asked – and not asked – on this topic.

This is not to say that Myers was unaware of the limitations of the format and method she chose to use for her work of making Jung's typology "practical and useful in people's lives." After all, she continually stated that the sole point of the MBTI was to indicate type preferences (crucially, not the dynamics underpinning them) according to Jung's theory. Strictly speaking then, the MBTI is not an end in itself, apart from the need to ensure that it meets certain psychometric criteria for reliability and validity, and that its variance from standard psychometric method, scientific in itself, is due to a different concept of personality from the linearity presumed by continuous scores, for instance. Its view of personality is explained by Jung's theory, not by measurement, however important that may be.

Jung, of course, was not keen on instrumentation at all, or of the mathematics required as part of their development. Once you got into the realm of statistics, he believed, you were out of the realm of psychology altogether: a somewhat limiting view in some ways, but one which has increasing resonance in our everyday world where quantification, however well or badly done, seems all-important and convincing for our business and political leaders. Jung might also have been aware that you can measure something that doesn't exist, something Graham Richards points out (1996) with respect to psychology.

The many personality instruments out there, however well-constructed, are all self-referential, i.e. their questions are designed to produce a particular outcome. It doesn't follow that the underlying constructs are true or real. It's currently impossible to say whether the Hermann Brain Dominance Indicator, for instance, has anything to do with brain dominance at all, according to neuroscientists Springer and Deutsch (1998). Isabel Myers started with the theory, tested it, and then developed the questions for the MBTI. She called her work an "indicator" for good reason. When in doubt with MBTI results, she advised, look at the person, not the indications from the MBTI.

The psychometric requirement of predictability in outcome, too, presumes a mind or self that doesn't quite fit Jung's typology and Myers' interpretation, where there is choice, rather than lack of choice, in what we do. This is why it's more appropriate to say that type *explains*, rather than *predicts*, behaviour. There are so many variables in personality activity (gender, education, culture, geography etc) that predictability can be lost amidst the details of existence and the definition of type as a cognitive, psychological process disappears as well.

Prediction is also not necessarily what science is about. The scientist David Deutsch has commented that:

... to say that prediction is the purpose of a scientific theory is to confuse means with ends. It is like saying that the purpose of a spaceship is to burn fuel. In fact, burning fuel is only one of many things a spaceship has to do to accomplish its real purpose, which is to transport its payload from one point in space to another. Passing experimental tests is only one of many things a theory has to do to accomplish its real purpose of science, which is to explain the world.. We test ... new theories that seem to show promise of explaining things better than the prevailing ones do. (1997)

So it is with type. It's only useful ultimately if it explains human beings better than other theories or methods. Otherwise, the point in using it is severely limited, to say the least.✘

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Living type (2): Snapshots of type in the workplace

... Superintendent [Prior of Sydney CIB] assumed that a range of talents would be needed if the [1935 'Shark Arm'] investigation was to have any chance of success. The two men he assigned to take charge complemented each other in important ways. ...

Matthews was no visionary, but he had a messianic zeal for his police work. He could be expected to drive himself and his colleagues ruthlessly as he pursued any traces of the missing man.

Almond, too, was extremely hard working. But he was more thoughtful than his colleague, more imaginative as well, which might enable him to detect evidence that the straightforward Matthews would overlook. It was a feature of his police work that might be particularly significant in an investigation that no one really knew how to begin.

- Alex Castles (1995), The shark-arm murders, Kent Town, S.A.: Wakefield, pp 48-49

[Australian cricket captain Steve] Waugh will never be fully appreciated as a skipper because his best work is done behind closed doors, quietly building up players' confidence, ensuring team harmony ...

[His predecessor Mark] Taylor was direct and forthright with his players but, unlike Waugh, it wasn't his nature to pump up their tyres. ... he said: "It's not my style to mollycoddle players."

- Robert Craddock (2000), 'Waugh or Taylor: Two of a kind?', The Sunday Mail, 9 January, pp 140-141