Other peoples' worlds

Language, type and being normal

Freewheelin' with Peter Geyer

In type, what you see may not be what you get. Our behaviours are contingent upon time, place and context. The Freewheelin' Peter Geyer ponders the inaccessibility of our inner worlds.

Who can know
The thoughts of Mary Jane
Why she flies
Or goes out in the rain

Who can know
The reason for her smile
What are her dreams
When they've journeyed for a mile

      —Nick Drake, 'The thoughts of Mary Jane'

Going to see the river man
Going to tell him all I can
About the ban on being free

If he tells me all he knows
About the way his river flows
I don't suppose it's meant for me

      —Nick Drake, 'River man'

You might have told me
That love was not enough
You might have lied
And told me that it was

      —Jonatha Brooke, 'The gilded cage'

What *can* we know about human beings and their thoughts and desires?

Are people ultimately a mystery, as Nick Drake suggests in his musing about Mary Jane? Is such knowledge something that, even if it is disclosed, as in the rhyme of the river man, is nonetheless excluded from individual grasp; not meant for some at all?

I suspect that something like this dilemma drew both C G Jung and Isabel Briggs Myers, in their separate ways, to the study of human behaviour. Jung, of course, was not for quantification. Myers, by necessity and culture, was drawn to numbers, although not in the conventional way. Averages were for her a means to an end: the important thing was to look at the *individual*, how they manifested type in their own way.

The manifestation of type, of course, changes over time and place. Behaviours are outcomes of other processes. Categories such as Generation X, Baby Boomers, and 'Organizational Kid' (David Brooks' term for the hard-working, authority-respecting approach of contemporary well-to-do American students), are not about personality as seen through type. Those terms describe generalised social and economic patterns, not individuals: they are simply general behaviours current at a particular time. Even the conservative Australian Prime Minister John Howard liked Bob Dylan's music at one time.

If the conventional young person acted differently in 1971 than in 1991 or 2001, that says little about type—except perhaps for those groups who value convention. For obvious reasons, an INTP in Machiavelli's Florence would not be interested in computers, but they may get a decent conversation from Nicolo himself, or feel relaxed with the ideas of Leonardo—both perhaps similar types.

This doesn't work all the time, of course. With someone like Karl Marx (to me, clearly an NT), you might get a drink- and cigar-driven polemic thrust in your direction. Karl apparently liked a pub crawl (Wheen 1999). On the other hand, Brooks' Organization Kids would probably be at home with Jean Calvin in Geneva, at least philosophically. Never have an idle moment, for there the devil lies! Not too good for introverts, really.

It seems to me that one reason for this confusion between people and context is a concentration on what we *see* (in type terms, extraversion of some sort), with a presumption that that's all there is.

So we place emphasis on generalisations of what people want and do, through opinion polls and rating systems which are then averaged, thus leaving a lot of people out. Jonathan Shier's rather controversial ABC tenure is surely based around averages (ratings) rather than real people and their differences. But he's not the only one.

This tendency is due partly, at least, to trying to make everything "scientific"—management, relationships, life in general—and so, in some ways, attempting to eliminate the art of life. This is compounded by the strong diagnostic and medical influence in trying to understand people or, rather, trying to *fix* them, which, like most things, can have positive and negative consequences.

There's no right type to be, but many people want to find out what that is anyway. So eliminating diseases through gene therapy, for instance, also has implications for eliminating idiosyncrasies in human beings—something that not too many people who write about these things seem to be aware of. Futurists appear to forget all about individuality. Perhaps we're all in our own boxes of learning and perspectives a little too much.

In that context, one of the things not expressed often enough about type is that it stretches the boundaries of normal behaviour, and encourages, as a consequence, a broader look at information about human beings. If we want to follow Jung more closely, we'll also critically examine this information and work out what's misleading or false. Valuing other views doesn't (or at least shouldn't) mean accepting things that are not true, notwithstanding the all-pervading world of spin, where everything is relative.

Type offers us a relatively simple proposition: if it's good to be you, then what's conventional for your type must be counted as normal. It doesn't work that way, of course. The obvious differences between cultural groups aside, this is still fairly complex territory, and what's conventional or normal varies. In cultural contexts, the averaging that Jung complained about also tends to militate against broader definitions of normal.

So, one of the differences between type and other personality perspectives is *language*. Is it good to be you, or should you be fixed? It's not as simple as that, of course, but the history of the definition of personality disorders isn't great science (or art, for that matter).

Herb Kutchins and Stuart Kirk have described the history and development of the DSM IV (the latest version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, used by psychiatrists and others) in less than glowing terms, particularly with respect to the debate over whether homosexuality is a disorder. Reading Kutchins and Kirk's book, I was reminded of Ray Choiniere's comment at the 1996 Temperament conference in Los Angeles about the DSM being "a social and political document."

Language can be rhythmic and lovely, even when it is describing disorders. The science writer John Horgan (1999) mentions *dissociative fugue* as an overwhelming urge to travel away from one's home or workplace. I have the reverse problem at the moment, but I know a couple of people who might do that as normal practice.

Horgan also gives other references such as *anti-social personality disorder* (impulsivity or failure to plan ahead), and *attention-deficit disorder* (failure to give close attention to detail, or making careless mistakes). Now if we were to take these words at face value, then specific types are clearly going to be in a lot of trouble— me included.

This is not to say that we should throw the baby out with the bath water. But I think we're in serious difficulty in recognising the gifts of others and helping them when they're in strife, if our first step is to lock them into a medical diagnosis. And yet that is precisely what insurance companies and education departments do as normal practice.

Horgan's work is also relevant for an assessment of the use of drugs to regulate / assist other people's behaviour. Popular solutions for depression these days seem to be linked to either drugs or cognitive behavioural therapy, a variant of extraverted thinking. Neither of these is the universal panacea that its supporters claim, and the use and efficacy, even danger, of drugs in particular seems to be either under-researched or discounted.

This dilemma has been pointed out recently by the journalist Peter Ellingsen (2001) in observing the interaction between the professionals and the drug companies at a psychiatrists' conference. A lethal side effect of a specific drug (for another, not the drug taker) was alluded to in a legal judgement reported in *The Australian* recently.

Horgan's broad survey of what we actually know of the mind (in summary: not much at all) and Elliot Valenstine's more specific critique (1998) should give us pause to reflect on what sort of society we want, and what we think about when we want to diagnose and regulate the behaviour of the people in it, given that we are a democracy.

So, a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, and it can come out in surprising ways, at both the societal and personal levels.

In her beguiling couplet at the beginning of this article, for instance, Jonatha Brooke expresses a common dilemma in wanting to be in a relationship at all costs, even at the cost of love, and the ambivalent, paradoxical quality of knowledge in that context—something like, "I wish you'd told me, but why did you have to tell me at all?" Another way of putting this is, "I'd like to know, but don't tell me", because this unsatisfactory situation, what I might want, is better than getting what I really need. This is an unacceptable state of affairs, one would think, but you may be surprised about the reality.

Jungian analyst and author Polly Young-Eisendrath always has something important to say. She has recently addressed the distinction between being wanted and being loved (2000). In this case,

wanted is broadly about a disempowering, limiting and ultimately unsatisfactory situation, while *loved* actually has a quality of reality and self-acceptance about it, as well as acceptance by the partner, mate, or whoever as to who that person is.

Young-Eisendrath quite clearly presents that as a dilemma for women, but my reading suggests that there's more than something there for men as well. In any case, it takes two, as those popular folk philosophers Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell proclaimed a few decades ago.

It follows that, both inside and outside relationships, you can be *wanted* for your knowledge, attributes or skill, but not actually *loved* or seen as who you are. Much of our energy in finding out about people is in fact about what's wrong with them.

You rarely hear politicians complimenting their opponents for a new idea or opinion. Indeed, as the social researcher Hugh Mackay points out (2001), the main aim in politics these days is to seem as unreal as possible in both language and present-ation. Paradoxically, this doesn't seem to endear politicians to their clientele (the voters), which makes me wonder.

Maybe it's all a hopeless task. Indeed, some seem to have given up. I suspect, though, it's got a lot to do with what's euphemistically called "spin", where what's important is not what you actually say, but what it looks and sounds like.

It'll save us money on education, at any rate. If there's minimal content, or if the content hasn't much reality to it, then people won't need to know how to evaluate or query it. Perhaps, like Brooks' subjects, they might simply reach for Huxley's *soma*, or its modern equivalents in pharmaceuticals and entertainment.

Doesn't seem to me to be the world of Jung or Myers at all—but who knows the way the river flows? ▧

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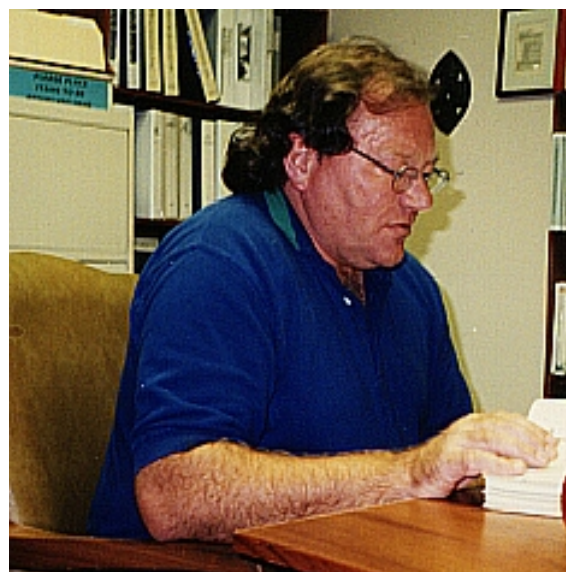Young-Eisendrath, Polly 2000, *Women and desire: Beyond wanting to be wanted*, Judy Piatkus.

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> *Tell me the thoughts that surround you*
> *I want to look inside your head*
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> —Peter Sarstedt, 'Where do you go to, my lovely?'
>
> *If I used the language of my own consciousness, you would not know what I was talking about. Don't try to understand me. My depth is unfathomable. Just love me.*
>
> —Meher Baba