

Energy fools the magician

On being misled

Peter Geyer

All the cards float in words
All the words float in sequence
No-one knows what they mean
Everyone just ignores them

Brian Eno

Tell me what you want me to be
Then look again and you will see
That I'm still the same

Dave Mason

There's no such thing as bad weather,
only wrong clothes.

Billy Connolly

Have you felt a little misled lately? Or, perhaps, a lot? Have people failed to deliver on their promises, or have your expectations not been realised?

Have people you've trusted not told the truth?

Is reality not as it seems, honesty at a premium, truth unattainable or relative, spun out of control?

A glance at newspapers and events this year might suggest that a high percentage of the population is feeling this way: Tampa, HIH, Democrats, football of whichever code, to name a few. And, of course, we all have our own private events of significance.

Sometimes it's the mundane things that catch you out, like customer service. The incongruity of being in a line of cars in McDonald's, then finding that the new special (usually resembling something reasonable) takes a few minutes, and 'Will you wait?' Why offer it, if you can't meet the service standard?

I tell myself I'm only there for the coffee. I've been a serial McDonald's avoider until recently, when I decided to drink their coffee on long journeys. I live 270 km from Melbourne, so I drive a lot, and this seemed the easy way out. I've accepted the principle of fast service that the brand implies, and that's what I want when I go on journeys.

Like the esteemed historian of science Steven Shapin (2002), I find the experts' discussion about diet fairly incoherent and often counterproductive. Perhaps that's because the law they lay down seems to change with each new study, and is often taken literally, rather than examined and critiqued. Anyway, it's amounts and exercise, rather than content, that's my diet / weight issue.

Elsewhere, away from time clocks, I've found that the notion of service of any kind doesn't apply. It can be a combination of delegation and then being ignored, as happened to me recently, and about which I complained. The interesting thing from that experience was the lack of recognition of a service issue by the person in charge at the time. Still astounds me, but maybe I should get out more. I'm sure you have your own examples.

Perhaps these things happen because there is little accountability around. Agreements are made, but not implemented; discussions ignored. An accident occurs in a workplace, but no-one is responsible; often the management blames the people who work for them, as if there is no accountability for their policies and practices.

But they've probably all done their customer service, team development and management programs, often with MBTI added. The latter, of course, is often described as 'just a tool', but it comes with its own truths attached, and there's a legitimate presumption that they somehow resemble reality, or at least indicate towards it.

In all this, perhaps the wrong questions are being asked. And a search for truth, even in diet research or type, demands that we ask the *right* ones.

Isabel Myers and her husband Chief regularly had Sunday breakfast at McDonalds. I presume that, as an ISTJ, he liked the consistent service, but I don't know: it could have been the view, or the company.

In the early part of their marriage, in fact, Isabel tried to be the 'good spouse' by cooking for Chief, and she was perturbed when he voiced a preference for eating out. At first she thought he didn't like her cooking, and so took it a little personally. But when she asked him about it, he said that her cooking wasn't the issue; he just preferred eating out. And so that was that.

It's amazing what a question can do. Might uncover some truth.

Felix Fernandez-Armesto (1997) wrote about truth, because 'our society has come to lose faith in the reality of it and lose interest in the search for it'. He writes about the various types of truth through history. It's a good read: 'the truth you feel' seems to relate fairly well to feeling; thinking and sensing get a reasonable go, and relativism a fair battering. Some nice descriptions, and a few insights.

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As type users, we have to watch our descriptions. Is an ENFP's (or, for that matter, an ISTJ's) interest in *feng shui* an example of Ne or Si, dominant or inferior? Both answers are possible, and either may be right.

Classifying an activity depends on other factors: whether it's obsessive or relaxed; how much energy the interest takes; why there's an interest in the first place; and so forth. It could be the unconscious, and we can't be sure what that holds, not even by listening to the experts.

For instance, if you take a look at Jungian analyst John Beebe's model, where the eight functions are arrayed in an order for each type extending beyond the inferior function (Harris 1996), then a number of questions need to be posed.

Firstly, how should we take it? Is it to be interpreted literally, a kind of 'Jungian fundamentalism', as Andrew Samuels might have it (1998).

Here's an example I made up:

I was walking down the street and I saw a dog (Se) crossing the road. I like dogs, and this one was well-groomed and well-behaved (Fe). I wondered where he was going (Ne)? While walking, I reflected on what truth might actually be (Ti) ...

I know a few people who do this, and I'm not sure of its merit—but perhaps I need to learn more.

Secondly, what do we need to know in order to comprehend and use Beebe's model, given that six of the eight functions are going to be predominantly unconscious, and all of them are linked to archetypes?

This is fairly complex stuff. It's not the same as simply scanning down a list, particularly as the preferences are notionally content-free, and you can get yourself into trouble with inappropriate interpretation.

Thirdly, what's Beebe's purpose in presenting this framework? He's respected in the clinical and Jungian fields, and I think his ideas have merit, but his aim may not be the same as the average MBTI user.

(I was fortunate to meet Beebe briefly a few years ago, but these questions weren't in my head at the time.)

One of the dangers of type self-description is that not everyone has a handle on how their type actually works, particularly once you get past the first two preferences. It requires a knowledge of what the theory actually says, not what you *think* it does, and that can be a little challenging. It takes a lot of work, and some of the insights are reflective after the event ('Why did I do/say that?').

Part of the thing about experts and bad service and lack of accountability is that it can be seen as 'your problem' if you're dissatisfied or feel misled. Even given the personal responsibility to find out things, what is the truth, I think that approach is unhelpful, to say the least.

The Americans seem to solve this problem in some areas by being litigious (something we seem to be catching up on), but that seems often to miss the point. Blame and accountability aren't all that related, and the legal system and truth don't necessarily see eye-to-eye either.

Psychology can often be less than helpful in this age of self-improvement (a Calvinist idea, actually) because it all rebounds back on ourselves in some personal inadequacy or failure. We can all improve, I suppose, but 'why?' and 'by how much?' are useful questions to ask—and, I suspect, difficult to answer.

There are times when an improvement approach to life is fairly useless, even dangerous (particularly if you can't afford the legal advice required to set out to punish those who have wronged you). Perhaps the rising use of anti-depressants has to do with the prospect of changing society being put out of the question in the clinical setting, or even in the office.

David Concar suggests that the increase in Ritalin use has more to do with a change in social values, or even social control, than the efficacy of the drug itself (2002). David Smail has written forcefully and eloquently on the issue of society and therapy (1999). His stuff has recently been relaunched, and it's recommended reading if you're interested in this question.

It's easy to say to someone that they're in the gutter, or an unwelcome situation, because they *chose* to be so, rather than to look at the social complexities that surround their state. Choices are rarely black or white, and frequently there isn't a real choice at all, without even taking into account conscious / unconscious issues. Or being diagnosed as depressed because of some personal inadequacy, and accordingly prescribed the relevant *soma*.

In critiquing the discipline of psychiatry, Bob Johnson observes that, for example, 'understanding neurochemicals doesn't help us deal with fear' (2002), although it probably regulates fear.

Robert Epstein of *Psychology Today* is trying to make love more rational and regulated (Cooper, 2002), something that suggests he may not have much of a grip on reality. Maybe he's just indulging in wishful thinking, based on his personal experience. This is a reminder that psychology isn't what you might think it is: historically, it's essentially about behaviour and control (Rachlin 1994).

So it's a lot harder to say that maybe we should work on a more equitable society than we have now, as part of looking after our citizens. It seems to me to be part of the democratic way, but recent events indicate there's a long way to go. Life's tough, of course, but I don't see why it should deliberately be made tougher.

For me, the aim of the MBTI and type is to discover the *truth* about people, not what we might want or desire, and that these ways of understanding people help to answers questions that can lead to a better society overall.

We can't do that unless we examine the method in the first place. Otherwise, we can easily be misled. ❖

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