

## **Our Personalities**

In our pursuit of happiness most of us entertain thousands of desires based on hundreds of motives. Our experiences of happiness and unhappiness, pleasure and pain, reinforce some of those desires and discourage others. Over time these various experiences of success and failure build up our attitudes towards life, our fundamental beliefs about what life is really like.

There is a problem, though, with many of our experiences --- they are either deceptive or inadequate teachers. That is because even on those rare occasions when the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of a desire is clearly perceived, the more fundamental desires at work (the motives for that desire) are often ignored. Since each of these ignored motives plays a profound role in the production of the quality of the happiness that results from the fulfillment of that desire, or the quality of the unhappiness that results whenever that desire is left unfulfilled, the lessons of even our clearest experiences can still be garbled.

This distortion of reality, caused by the way we understand ourselves, by the way we perceive our experiences, has led to many conclusions about happiness which severely handicap us in its pursuit. We are sometimes so confused that we even conclude that that pursuit itself is the cause of all our suffering, that it is inherently not worthwhile, or, if we are in a somewhat lighter mood, that that pursuit is at best a superficial, vain or indecent distraction from the real goal of life.

The irony of these conclusions about the purpose of life is that they strengthen the same beliefs which make our experiences so incomprehensible. And yet, no matter what we believe about the value of the pursuit of happiness, it is an inescapable part of all our lives.

The proof of how unavoidable that pursuit is can still be seen, even when buried under contrary imagery, in those confusing conclusions which reject happiness as an unworthy goal for our lives, because the reason always given for that rejection is that it is required in order to attain a future state of grace --- that is, a future state of profound, if abstract, happiness.

Our inherited cultural values enshrine these conflicts, and this confusion, which is yet another reason the attempt to understand our personalities is considered hopeless. But even without that added hurdle, the sheer complexity of our experiences themselves seems to make an accurate unraveling of them impossible.

Fortunately, even a tightly-wound rope, made of millions of tiny threads bound together into thousands of long strands, can be unraveled. All that is needed is the correct tool --- a sharp and unsparring knife. But in this case it must be a delicate one, like a surgeon's scalpel, because destruction is not our goal. Knowledge is. And although detailed knowledge of the ins and outs of all our personalities may be impossible, principled knowledge about them is not.

The principles of how the intertwined threads of our experiences are coiled into the ropes of our

personalities, and of how we are often deceived by our experiences into making unwarranted decisions in our pursuit of happiness, can be both known and understood. And we don't even have to agree with Socrates's drastic conclusion that the unexamined life is not worth living to conclude that at least a little time spent examining our experiences, in an attempt to undo the influence of any false lessons they may have taught us, could prove useful to our daily lives.

### **Another Attempt**

Trying to unravel our experiences may not be the world's oldest profession, but it is not the newest either. Throughout human history the attempt to explain our personalities has been made. Almost every religious belief, from tribal animistic beliefs to international faiths, was at least partially inspired by the search for such an explanation.

Many of those religious inspirations and insights are quite useful and often very revealing. But the puzzle our personalities continue to present us with is a classic case of contradictory sensory impressions. And the classic solution to any such puzzle is to use the correct tool, the sharp and unsparing knife of logic, to determine whether a coherent viewpoint exists which can eliminate the conflicts among all those impressions.

If we take the time, we can all see the sun rise in the morning and set in the evening. Our ancestors, based on similar impressions, concluded that the sun revolves around a flat earth. But over time they also noticed that objects in the path of sunlight cast shadows, and that those shadows differ in size and shape depending on the time of day, and that eclipses of the sun and moon occur which look suspiciously like a circular shadow crossing their surface. To make a coherent picture out of all this conflicting sensory data required reasoning. And once that reasoning was clear, it reversed the earlier, seemingly more logical, conclusion.

Attempting to find a similarly classic solution to the puzzle of our personalities has also been tried before. One of the earliest known attempts is Plato's. One of the most recent is Freud's. Both divided our personalities into three parts. Plato called those divisions the intellect, the will and the appetites. Freud called them the superego, the ego and the id.

This convergence seems to indicate that some division of this kind may be inherent in our personalities, but a closer look reveals that these divisions are basically useful for clarifying why we have internal conflicts, why "the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak," as a more religious explanation would put it. The problem remains, though, that not all internal conflicts can be explained in this way.

Plato's and Freud's proposed divisions are probably misleading because they imply one higher, purer section of our minds is uneasily allied with a practical will, but dragged down by unruly instincts. That picture of our personalities may be slightly more detailed than most religious explanations, but it is so fundamentally in harmony with them that we should scrutinize it closely to avoid accepting unwarranted prior assumptions.

This is not to deny that it can be quite useful to see the intellect (or the superego) as preferring higher pursuits, while admitting that the appetites (or the id), in all but rare cases, have more influence over the will (or the ego) and that the intellect is most often ignored (unless it strikes back in the form of a nagging conscience). But these formulations do not solve many other internal conflicts we entertain.

That is because those conflicts are not limited to the superego fighting the id, or to the id fighting the ego. Quite often it is the superego fighting itself. Or the ego fighting itself. Or the id fighting itself. And even attempting to discover the additional number of divisions that would be required to separate all these internal conflicts would severely degenerate the usefulness of these generalizations.

Still, these ideas have obviously been successful in providing insights into the causes of personality disorders. But the lessons learned on that playing field are not always applicable to everyone. A tree, especially in a forest, will often make an overwhelmingly green impression. And it is useful to describe how influential green is in a tree. But that is not all there is to the tree, any more than the drive for sex (or survival) is all there is to our personalities. Those drives are influential, and when they are obsessions often create the appearance of being fundamental. But they cannot be as fundamental as is sometimes thought, or other desires would never be able to override them. And there are people whose lives are not driven by sex, and others who sacrifice their survival for a variety of reasons.

Explanations of the first group as having defective DNA with no desire to reproduce itself, and of the second as altruistically inclined to further the reproductive efforts of related strands of DNA, will not survive the 21<sup>st</sup> Century once it is clearly recognized that displacing our desires onto our DNA is an unjustified leap of deterministic faith. There is no evidence that DNA desires anything. It has shown even less inclination to indulge in free will actions than people suffering under extremely restrictive authoritarian regimes.

This fact, that supposedly fundamental drives can be overridden by other desires, indicates that those drives are simply other desires which can be pursued, or not pursued, depending on our choice (or the appearance of our choice, if we only appear to have wills). The key to understanding the patterns of our personalities, then, lies not in becoming absorbed in the various shades of green one particular drive produces in abundance, but in delineating the structure of our personalities, one outgrowth of which is that abundant production.