What is personality?

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It has been defined as the total pattern of an individual's abilities, beliefs, habits, expectations, prejudices, strengths and weaknesses, and the way in which these are combined to achieve a distinct and unique person. This is a cumbersome definition, yet if it is simplified to manageable proportions and expressed as 'that which makes a person unique', there is very little definitive value left. Whether the long or short form of the definition is adopted, a brief check on the environment of persons in general is enough to remind us that although each person is unique, he comes from a gregarious species: men are interdependent, and there are social consequences of, and social effects on, personality.

We have already looked at perception of things in the environment and decided that this involves a complicated process of sensory stimulation, analysis, matching and sorting to identify anything and give it a meaning. The personalities of the people in our lives give them their identities, their individuality; the personalities we grant them are the sum of the observations we make about them in our 'person perceptions'. If we found perception of objects to be rather complicated, person perception is likely to prove even more intricate: people have rather more differences than they have similarities. It is relatively easy to identify a collection of two upper limbs, two lower limbs, a trunk, head and neck in suitable arrangement as a fellow human being, but it is wildly optimistic to expect it to react, or to have opinions, to believe, etc., as we do ourselves. Experience of human beings tells us one thing: they are highly unpredictable on the first encounter and may remain so unless we 'get to know them better'. This process of getting to know a person better is a gentle disguise for our continuous attempts to remould them, or our impressions of them, so that they fit into our personal summaries of the people we have met before: we are hunting for a 'category' into which they fit and which we can use as a ready made device for monitoring our own behaviour and adjusting it to suit what we predict theirs will be.

Our first attempts to summarize the qualities of a new acquaintance are a bit clumsy: there is a tendency to use stereotypes in this first 'sorting' exercise. Stereotypes come to hand easily as they are ready made, adopted from
cultural and familial beliefs, often racist and all highly prejudiced. If we are asked what we think of someone after a brief meeting, we may say of the round, jolly person that he 'looks cheerful', or of the thin, agitated person that he 'looks anxious'. Someone who smiled at us several times is likely to seem 'friendly'. After a further meeting or conversation, we might allow ourselves to say that 'Joe has a warm, cheerful personality', which probably means that as far as we can tell he has a tendency to remain cheerful whatever happens to him and to his immediate environment. There have been some very determined efforts to explain WHY people develop a certain characteristic way of dealing with themselves and their surroundings. The search is still going on, and in addition there is an increasing interest in finding ways of encouraging people to demonstrate HOW they perceive qualities of personality in their fellow human beings. The following section is a rapid review of some of the theories and styles of investigation that have occupied students of personality in the distant and recent past. It begins by setting out the agreed requirements of a good theory so that you will be able to judge the merits of the competing ideas of the theorists.

**Requirements of a good theory**

* The basic assumptions of the theory must be relevant to the area it is said to cover.
* The theory must have rules which define the relationship between its assumptions and which make it possible to explain their interactions.
* The theory must be internally consistent: contradictory elements in a theory destroy its value, since it is equally possible to prove it or to disprove it.
* The variables that are considered in the theory must be described in operational terms.
* The theory must make use of all the established knowledge of the field it attempts to describe and its concepts must be compatible with that body of knowledge.
* The theory must have predictive potential in new situations.

In general, theories of personality have had difficulty in meeting these six requirements, particularly the one that specifies that a theory must be comprehensive, and so must include all the facts that are known about personality. The greatest pressure for such sweeping explanations and profound theories has come from the medical world in the past. Attempts to solve the problems of mental disorders have been made via analysis of personality and interpretation of unusual or socially unacceptable behaviour. This has led to some of the broader theories being founded on clinical data rather than on observations of the normal, healthy members of the population. The detailed exposition of personality proposed by Freud is an example of a general theory derived solely from clinical evidence, combined with a generous amount of introspection and subjective interpretation.