Why Are People Like This?

# Introduction

People are confusing. While most of us can come to understand some people well enough to make pretty decent predictions about how they’ll act and react, plenty of others will act in ways that seem inexplicable. Complicating matters further, who’s easy or difficult to figure out, who seems simple or complicated, varies from person to person. One’s first guess might be that this simply comes down to how similar or different someone is from oneself, but understanding oneself is very often an incredible challenge. Plenty of psychotherapists make a good living helping people come to understand just their own minds and behaviors. A large part, if not the central focus, of Philosophy throughout history is the acquisition of self-understanding.

I’ve been motivated to pursue an understanding of people by daily interaction as well as by learning about people in different times and places. Prior to learning what I share in this book, my guesses about what others were thinking and feeling, and how they might act or react, left me often isolated, misunderstood, and unable to get along very well with a lot of people. Sometimes I would make the mistake of assuming some personality trait of mine was a universal feature of human psychology. Or the converse: that some common human trait is a quirk of mine. Other times, I’d simply be at a loss for any reasonable explanation for why someone acted the way they did. As a teacher, I wanted to be able to meet all of my students where they’re at, not just the ones who happened to click with my natural tendencies. As a manager, I needed to understand my teams to support each individual well and find roles that suited them well. As a person, I wanted to get closer with more people, to make friends with a wide variety of people, and simply aiming to understand human nature in general wasn’t providing adequate understanding of the unique individuals that exist in real life.

The second motivation is perhaps a bit more academic in nature. In a Philosophy class called “Evil” I assisted in teaching, we looked at some of the worst examples of human behavior and tried to make sense of why people commit evil acts.[[1]](#footnote-0) While simply labeling some people as “evil people” is a very popular move, it doesn’t explain anything, and there’s plenty of examples of “good people” doing horrific things and “evil people” doing heroic things. Different theories of moral psychology are commonplace basically everywhere and throughout history, but a pattern quickly appears of every theory explaining some people’s behavior quite well while also falling to counterexamples that demonstrate how non-universal the theory’s explanatory power is.[[2]](#footnote-1) And this is all just trying to explain one extreme corner of human behavior. If understanding even something like why people participate in genocide, even in a single place and time, requires a variety of explanations, one can imagine how inadequate universal explanations must be for the full range of human behavior.

Despite this variety, there’s also a remarkable amount of commonality across settings. How one’s personality is expressed of course varies with one’s environment, but wherever one looks, there’s rebels and conformists, introverts and extraverts, altruists and sadists, and so on. Archetypes like the narcissist and the hermit show up everywhere. The characters from even ancient dramas make sense and are relatable because the range of variety actually does seem to be a human universal. There’s a cliche, “Socialization explains why we’re all the same, personality explains why we’re all different,” which applies pretty well when looking at individuals in a shared social environment. If you’re looking at individuals who act similarly in different social environments, the opposite is the case: socialization explains why populations act differently while personality explains the commonalities individuals have across populations. While socialization is undoubtedly an important aspect of understanding why people are the way we are, the focus of this book is personality. However, socialization will still be in the picture, as my intent is to increase understanding of *people*, not just 21st century people, or Americans, or any other category of people sharing a setting.[[3]](#footnote-2) Thus, the theories put forth must hold up regardless of the diversity of socializations, and so a variety of contexts must be considered.

People are weird. I’m about to spend a lot of time using the words “people” and “person” in a way that is distinct from my use of “humans”. While our archetype of a person is in fact a human person, and most of the time these words can be interchanged, I must be clear that this is the kind of book in which “human” and “person” take on many of their definitions, but should not ever be exchanged without justification.

This raises some initial questions. Where does the word “human” come from? Where does “person” come from? How did the use of these words evolve over time? One could challenge the grounding of the claims to knowledge I make hereafter, but I proceed in the face of ever-possible skepticism. Who is included or not is an open question philosophically, but also empirically. Given the lack of consensus on these weighty matters, I cannot claim to have a firm grasp on the language at the outset.

The plan for the chapters is as follows: The first chapter will focus on the four basic bipolarities of personality. The second will detail a limited taxonomy of personalities.

1. Yes, there’s no end to the disagreements over what qualifies as “evil”. Yet, most students at least seem to have no problem understanding that things like the Holocaust, the Tuskegee experiments, and the Rape of Nanjing can be usefully understood as belonging to some shared category, and even the occasional student who *endorses* these atrocities understands the widespread opposition. Of course, in a different time and place, I may have to use different examples. Peter Singer’s “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” gets a lot of pushback from American students, but the people I’ve talked with from some poorer countries give the impression that it’s just obvious that people in wealthy nations spending large amounts on luxuries, fueled by an economy propped up by years of colonialism and military and economic coercion and exploitation, while millions die cheaply preventable deaths is evil. As Johnathan Haidt points out in *The Righteous Mind*, most people in fact have a broader range of evils to consider than people in western, economically-developed, industrialized, rich democracies. However, regardless of which collection of acts we’re considering evil, that collection demands explanation. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. This is, of course, not true of all such attempts to explain evil behavior. For instance, in *The Science of Evil*, Simon Baron-Cohen sets a foundation for understanding the various ways people can come to behave in such ways. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. You could point out technically I’m only talking about Earthlings, and only humans past a certain point of evolution. I am also assuming that only humans are people, though the theory put forth should apply well to non-human people if and when there are any. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)