

# Unfolding, Evolving: some observations on psychological type, genes, culture, development

*Peter Geyer*

University of South Australia  
[www.petergeyer.com.au](http://www.petergeyer.com.au)  
[peter@petergeyer.com.au](mailto:peter@petergeyer.com.au)  
Warrnambool Australia 3280

*To be inside and outside a position at the same time – to occupy a territory while loitering skeptically on the boundary – is often where the most intensely creative ideas stem from.*  
Terry Eagleton

One of the curiosities of C.G. Jung's psychological types (1990) is how little it's used or invoked alongside other ideas and current research into the nature of human beings. There are several possible reasons for this state of affairs. Among them are its association with the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator, the main avenue for encountering psychological type. This association can lead people to think, for instance, that these two things are inextricably intertwined i.e. the typology can't be conceived of outside the MBTI. The typology is then rarely proposed for consideration outside an instrumental approach to personality. There will be other reasons, of course.

Jung's typology is predominantly written about in the MBTI context, using the instrument's conventions and labels (E, I, etc) for his categories and adding the extra categories (J and P) that it provides. The availability of a number of books and booklets that explain in some detail aspects of a psychological type preference, particularly with respect to various behaviours (with labels attached), provides some complexity to the origins of these preferences in psychological functions and attitudes. In some ways though, these publications obscure inquiry into how these preferences come about, and how typologies arise because of their predominantly practical orientation.

The proposition that there **are** psychological types is a very complex idea. Its plausibility depends on commensurability with what is known elsewhere about human beings and their development. So perhaps we should speak of psychological type, or psychological orientation, rather than personality type. Talking about someone's psychological orientation is quite different to discussing their whole personality, for definitional reasons alone.

Part of psychological type explanation is about systematising outcomes, behaviours; a way of exploring personality dispositions. While observations of behaviour or outcomes are useful, many different conclusions have and can be drawn about the reasons for them, particularly cross-culturally and across generations. For instance, typological preference doesn't necessarily result in a skill, unless it's closely defined (i.e. what is a skill?). Psychological type theory could give a context for that, but it doesn't follow that specific skills are consequent, as they depend on other factors: education, ability, culture, gender, situation and so on. Psychological type preferences, by their nature, are content-free.

Jung's definition of personality as a vocation, or "calling", may be appropriate here, in preference to other definitions (1991). This is a process definition more than anything else, and has to do with consciousness, as he understood it, implying also that not everyone received or answered the call and that this was neither good nor bad for the person concerned.

There are also issues in academic discourse that proponents of Jung's typology in its various forms might take note of. It's always useful to find out what is going on in other fields, otherwise thought and action can become cultish. That works both ways, of course; however, as typological or Jungian perspectives are rarely presented as models and perspectives outside a small area of endeavour. The issues/ideas following appear highly relevant.

## **Essentialism**

Essentialism is a perspective that rejects any idea about human beings seeking to differentiate between individuals in a way which implies these are inherent, natural differences. The presumption is that these claimed essential characteristics are fixed and unalterable, hard-wired in a literal way – an ideal type, and that this is either impossible, or unpleasant to contemplate, perhaps both. This proposition is easily refuted by the general literature on psychological type and, more particularly, research elsewhere indicating a variety of human beings.

The notion that there are different types *per se* is still an issue for anti-essentialists. This seems to be a dogmatism in the face of what can be readily observed at home or in the street. However, being a good or insightful observer doesn't seem to be an essential characteristic of human beings.

Diversity and uniformity are two sides of the same coin. Often, those who speak of liberating people on whatever side of politics make the presumption that the liberated people will *ipso facto* be like them, sometimes immediately, other times after a particular revelation, or the provision of education and training.

A psychological type-oriented anti-essentialist may consider that, ultimately, agreement can be reached between the various types on how the world operates and how people should be treated. In so doing, they presume that human nature is the same for everyone.

## ***Tabula rasa***

Some of the arguments regarding personality being innate, in whatever way, have been settled, at least in scientific areas. Funder, in conducting a review of the field of personality research, baldly states that the field of behavioural genetics has “*documented, without a shadow of a remaining doubt, that personality is to some degree genetically influenced...The tabula rasa view of personality as a blank slate at birth that is written on by experience ...is wrong.* (2001 p207).

Whilst this statement isn't particularly remarkable, or new, particularly from a Jungian perspective, *tabula rasa* continues to have influence, including with users and experiencers of psychological type. Debates about nature and nurture continue to be part of general discourse, as well as in professional or organisational areas where personality is taught for whatever reason. Many education systems presume *tabula rasa*, for instance, as well as court systems and administrative processes.

## **Evolution**

C.G.Jung's typology also takes an evolutionary perspective. Jung used the words “innate” and “genetic” in interviews and writing, although the terms now have different meanings, due to greater knowledge. In doing so, Jung was pointing out that personality wasn't something arriving at birth and associated simply with experience. Interestingly, Isabel Myers didn't know whether Jung “believed” in evolution, although it was clear to her that evolution made sense (Myers 1970s).

In looking at recent developments in understanding species in general, there's growing evidence that various animals and birds possess some element of consciousness, as well as abilities that not all that long ago were considered restricted to human beings (e.g. Dally 2007). Plotkin and others suggest that non-humans may also be considered to have culture (Wheeler, *et al*, 2002). A difficulty in interpreting this research is the tendency to anthropomorphise non-human behaviour. The world of a crow isn't the same as the world of humans, for obvious reasons.

There's also a tendency to anthropomorphise constructs in this field, as elsewhere. “Nature”; “Mother Nature”; “Evolution” are often described as though they are an outside force directing some activity in the manner of the Greek gods and goddesses.

“Nature” is often described as being “angry” when a wild storm appears. Fire in bushfires/wildfires is increasingly described as something alive, with a mind of its own. The presumption here, incorrectly, is that “Nature” has a goal in mind, as does “Evolution”

“Evolution” is a label given to a natural process. As such, it doesn’t actually “do” anything in the anthropomorphic sense, or have goals. It doesn’t mean progress, simply adaptation and non-directional development. Not all adaptations in animals are successful, however defined, and it’s incorrect to presume that all adaptations have an advantage or logical purpose.

Human bodies contain cells and parts that don’t seem to have any current use; we’re cobbled together in a way. So to have something described as “designed by evolution” is missing the point and misleading others. So, too, is speaking about “evolved” people, something that has religious/spiritual connotations and origins, at least in North America (Geyer 2004). As with history, it’s easy to work out a pattern when looking back at the past, but it’s bad history and science to presume that the apparent progression actually occurred, or that this was the aim of whatever organisms (including humans) were concerned.

Evolutionary psychiatry (Stevens and Price 1996) and evolutionary psychology seem to suit an archetypal even theological (Winkelman, 2002) approach to personality, rather than a typological approach, given assertions about various behaviours being a consequence of a hunter-gatherer existence, for instance, or a primate brain. Scientific reports of genes being “for” something can heighten the number of these interpretations. Naturally, this has its limits—shopping, for instance, as Dagg (2005) has trenchantly pointed out.

Funder reports psychological researchers’ frustrations with determinist evolutionary theorising regarding specific behaviours (e.g. women seeking as mates men with money) rather than “general capacities and propensities” (2001). Like any idea, there are contingencies and limits, as well as a need for research and reflection.

Adaptation implies that you don’t develop something unless there’s a need for it; you or the environment, psychological or otherwise. You may not develop or adapt anything at all, and still survive/do well.

Epigenetics has come to the forefront in recent years and is controversial. It proposes a more complex interaction between nature and nurture/genes and environment. Jablonka and Lamb are at the forefront of this work, contending that there is more to heredity than genes; some hereditary variations aren’t random in origin; some acquired information (viz., what you learn from parents and others) is inherited; and so evolutionary change can result from instruction as well as selection (2005)

### **Culture**

Culture, a human presumption, is predominantly discussed in terms of behaviours, traditions and so on. Talking about culture can involve talking about stereotypes, a word and method usually identified as malign, notwithstanding its usefulness in many ways. Eagleton observes:

*“if a group of people have shared roughly the same conditions over long periods of time, it would be astonishing if they were not to manifest some cultural and psychological traits in common...This does not mean that such people will all be clones of one another; but habits of mind, patterns of behaviour and emotional dispositions are bound up with the way we live with others, rather than being purely personal affairs (2007)*

A selection of articles examining evolutionary aspects of culture provides the following comment from Ingold:

*“...organic form,,is generated, not expressed in development, and arises as an emergent property of the total system of relations set up by virtue of the presence and activity of the organism in the environment” (Wheeler et al, 2002).*

There’s a genetically influenced tendency for individuals to seek, create or end up in kinds of environments. Maccoby (2000) states that the effects of genes depend on environmental triggers or enabling, and the effects of different environments depend on the genetic characteristics of the individuals encountering an environment, essentially a different aspect of environment as a whole. General interactions of genes and environments can’t be found; therefore genes interact differently at different times. It’s also likely that genes don’t directly encode for personality traits

It can be hard for individuals to think of environmental and cultural influence as being more than a one-way street. The continuous exchange of person–environment is often expressed in a stimulus–response way due to earlier conventions. But this sort of exchange requires consideration of such things as children’s effect on other people rather than simply that of parents’ etc on children.

One can typologically reframe this sort of statement by saying that psychological orientation is generated by both being in and acting in an environment. You can’t be outside an environment. Expression of type might then have to do with behaviours and developments as person and environment shape each other.

### **Development**

The questions of development all start with the body (understood as not separate from the mind). How I as an individual wish to survive is also a psychological question, with material outcomes. The interaction of genes and environment once again is the core discussion here.

Kagan provides research that suggests that psychological orientation in children is not determinant from early days, but may change over time. This is with respect to his categories of *inhibited* and *uninhibited* where he shows that infants initially exhibiting one, other or neither of these attributes didn’t necessarily exhibit the same attribute at the age of 11. Many stayed the same, but some did not. This is not incompatible with experiences I’ve had in teaching adults who report that their earlier lives were different to how they now understood themselves (Kagan and Snidman 2004).

The biologist Sean Carroll (2005) has also recently written about how animals of all kinds grow from embryos to adults, by describing the development pattern and organisation, usually starting with a four-direction orientation of a cell and then the unfolding of the attributes of the being concerned. *Hox* genes are the core to this activity of developing a structure.

Research in this area also suggests that we may need to think a bit differently about terms like “hard–wired”. Gottesman and Hanson observe that while *“it has been a long–held belief that the central nervous system is hard–wired and cannot be changed easily by the time we reach adulthood. From the perspective of adaptability this would make no sense because we continue to learn change and adapt throughout the lifespan.”* (2005,p265).

Gene expression is dynamic over time.

None of this seems incompatible with a typological perspective, which has an implied timeline included in its ideas. As Jung’s idea of psychological orientation implies a developmental framework, then that framework must have form but not rigidity. Harold Grant’s model of type development has survived for decades, even prospered, notwithstanding that aspects of its proposed timeline are too rigid to be tenable or relevant to human beings in general. Development seems both a subjective and general process. Lifespan development is a complex arrangement, and not necessarily undertaken, whether or not according to a formula.

The Five-Factor Model, is referenced regularly in development literature. Recent comments have been made that suggest the timeline associated with this model, which contends personality traits don't alter much after adulthood is reached, is not correct. Life changes and role transitions important in personality development occur much later than young adulthood.

### **Conclusion**

This survey suggests that contemporary research in fields appropriate to the presumptions of C.G. Jung's typology and psychological orientation both support its general perspective and suggest adjustments to some of its explanatory elements. Future discoveries in these and other fields can help clarify how psychological types develop and what they mean. For instance, as the human brain is constantly exchanging information in response to experience, how there is consistency of type, as experienced with responses to the MBTI and other processes.

Uttal has counselled against the localisation of activities in the brain, and consequent labelling, calling it the *New Phrenology* (2001); Kagan points out that activity in the same area of the brain doesn't necessarily lead to the same behaviours (e.g. 2003; 2006). Jung might suggest that personality is at the quantum level (Meier, 2001); how to investigate that seems unclear.

The advent of a generation of humans raised on interaction with computers may be a way to test this out, whether by taking an archetypal, unconscious perspective, or observing when type preferences develop, particularly with respect to the judging functions.

It's clear in any case that human nature, however described, perpetually remakes itself. One of its remaking themes might be psychological orientation: the different personalities or psychologies and how they occur. These should be naturally occurring, but with regard to development and expression, not necessarily all the time.

The complexity of difference suggested and the depth of knowledge required for understanding psychological orientation. probably renders a typological approach untenable for researchers. There may also be confusion with the increasing number of labels for subsets of typological behaviours available in the marketplace; you have to get past labels to the principles behind them. It may be better to utilise Jung's original labels and seek clarity in what lies behind.

It's easier to wander through a glade than a thicket.

## Some references and reading

- Baltes, Paul B, Staudinger, Ursula M. and Lindenberger Ulman (1999) *Lifespan psychology: theory and application to intellectual functioning* Annual Review of Psychology 50, 1999 pp 471–508
- Boyer, Pascal (2000) *Evolutionary Psychology and cultural transmission* American Behavioural Scientist 43; 6, March 2000 pp987–1000
- Caporeal, Linnda R. (2001) *Evolutionary Psychology: Toward a unifying theory and a hybrid science* Annual Review of Psychology 52; 2001 pp607–628
- Carroll, Sean B. (2005) *Endless forms most beautiful: The new science of Evo Devo* W.W. Norton
- Caspi, Avshalom, Roberts, Brent W. and Shiner, Rebecca L. (2005) *Personality development: stability and change* Annual Review of Psychology 56, 2005 pp453–484
- Cervone, Daniel (2005) *Personality architecture: within–person structures and processes* Annual Review of Psychology 56, 2005 pp423–452
- Cervone, Daniel (2000) *Evolutionary Psychology and explanation in personality psychology: how do we know which module to invoke?* American Behavioural Scientist 43; 6, March 2000 pp 1001–1014
- Dagg, Anne Innis (2005) *“Love of Shopping” is not a gene: Problems with Darwinian Psychology* Black Rose Books
- Dally, Joanna (2007) *Don't call me birdbrained* New Scientist 194; 2609 23 June 2007 pp34–37
- Eagleton, Terry (2006) *Have you seen my Dada boss?* London Review of Books 28:23, 30 November 2006 pp9–10
- Eagleton, Terry (2004) *After Theory* Penguin
- Funder, David C. (2001) *Personality* Annual Review of Psychology 52, 2001 pp197–222
- Geyer, Peter (2007) *Immigration Song: Australians, culture, identity* Australian Psychological Type Review 9; 1, April 2007 pp11–19 and [www.petergeyer.com.au](http://www.petergeyer.com.au)
- Geyer, Peter (2004) *Developing models and beliefs: reviewing Grant, Thompson and Clarke's Image to Likeness after 20 years of life and type* Parts I and II Australian Psychological Type Review 6; 2 and 3. pp51–5; 37–42 and [www.petergeyer.com.au](http://www.petergeyer.com.au)
- Geyer, Peter (2004) *What did Isabel do? insights into the MBTI.* 6<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference of the Australian Association for Psychological Type Sydney 19–22 September 2002; and [www.petergeyer.com.au](http://www.petergeyer.com.au)
- Gottesman, Irving I., and Hanson, David R. (2005) *Human development: biological and genetic processes* Annual Review of Psychology 56: 2005, pp263–86
- Heckhausen, Jutta (2000) *Evolutionary perspectives on human motivation* American Behavioural Scientist 43; 6, March 2000 pp 1015–1029
- Jablonka, Eva and Lamb, Marion J.(2005) *Evolution in four dimensions: genetic, epigenetic, behavioural, and symbolic variation in the history of life* MIT Press
- Jung, C.G. (1990) *Psychological types* CW6 Princeton
- Jung, C.G. (1991) *The development of personality* CW17 Princeton
- Kagan, Jerome (2006) *An argument for mind* Yale
- Kagan, Jerome (2003) *Biology, context, and developmental inquiry* Annual Review of Psychology 54; 2003, pp1–24
- Kagan, Jerome and Snidman, Nancy(2004) *The long shadow of temperament* Harvard, Belknap Press
- Kelly, Heidi (2000) *Human parent–child relationships from an evolutionary perspective* American Behavioural Scientist 49; 6, March 2000 pp 957–969
- Maccoby, Eleanor E. (2000) *Parenting and its effects on children: On reading and misreading behaviour genetics* Annual Review of Psychology 51; 2000 pp1–27
- Meier, C.A. (ed) (2001) *Atom and Archetype: the Pauli/Jung letters 1932–1958* Princeton
- Myers, Isabel Briggs (1970s) *Various audiotapes* Private Collection/CAPT
- Ozer, Daniel J., and Benet–Martinez, Veronica (2006) *Personality and the prediction of consequential outcomes* Annual Review of Psychology 57; 2006 pp401421
- Rozin, Paul (2000) *Evolution and adaption in the understanding of behaviour, culture and mind* American Behavioural Scientist 43; 6, March 2000 pp 970–986
- Runciman, W.G. (ed.) (2001) *The origin of human social institutions* Oxford/The British Academy
- Rutter, Michael and Silberg, Judy (2002) *Gene–environment interplay in relation to emotional and behavioural disturbance* Annual Review of Psychology 53; 2002 pp463–90
- Stevens, Anthony and Price, John (1996) *Evolutionary psychiatry: anew beginning* Routledge
- Uttal, William R. (2001) *The new phrenology: the limits of localizing cognitive processes in the brain* MIT Press
- Wahlsten, D. (1999) *Single–gene influences on brain and behaviour* Annual Review of Psychology 50, 1999 pp599–624
- Wheeler, Michael; Ziman, John; and Boden, Margaret A. (eds) (2002) *The evolution of cultural entities* Oxford/The British Academy
- Winkelman, Michael (2002) *Shamanism as neurotheology and evolutionary psychology* American Behavioural Scientist 45; 12, August 2002 pp1875–1887