

CHAPTER

14

READING

THEORIES OF PERSONALITY

Psychologists do not all agree on one particular theory of personality. However, most seem to concur that systems for categorizing personality and classifying people help us make sense of ourselves and others. In his book *The Roots of the Self: Unraveling the Mystery of Who We Are*, noted psychologist and neurobiologist Robert Ornstein discusses the advantages and limits of such classification systems. In the excerpt that follows, Ornstein begins with a recollection of his first introduction to and misunderstanding of Sigmund Freud's theory concerning the id, the ego, and the superego.

It must have been 1947 or 1948.

I was trying to sleep, but my parents had company. My father's friend was explaining some of the theories about the persons that were au courant [current] in postwar New York:

"There's Sid" (I'm still sure that this is what he said), "there's the eagle, and there is the super-eagle, and each of them fights for control."

I knew a Sid who was a friend of my father's, but *this* "Sid" was more like Steve Martin's "wild and crazy kind of guy." The eagle, on the other hand, went forth bravely to organize one's life, while the super-eagle, the super-eagle. Well, I never grasped that one since I got too excited about it. I knew immediately that this was the one I wanted to be. I could see myself soaring over everything. And in my mind, over and over, I could hear the cry:

"Here comes the super-eagle!"

And then there was the inevitable time when I found out I was misinformed about this, and when I also found out the truth about Santa Claus.

Even before this discovery my young mind had made a good case for the usefulness of dividing the person into these three particular parts. Sid, I assumed, tried frantic things, the eagle advanced in life, and when things went wrong there was the amazing super-eagle who would swoop in and save the day.

In retrospect, this concept wasn't so much worse in accounting for the phenomena of the person than many of the more standard divisions of personality. After all, many of the most influential interpretations of the self stem from just such personal conceptions. The thinkers who have become household names may or may not have had professional training, they may or may not have been well informed, and their theories may or may not be functional.

In our own minds, we, too, tend to arrange people into groups, using such categories as excitable, placid, hot, cool, impulsive, disorderly, or controlled. Formal systems use different categories to try to explain individuality, whether those categories include the superego, the "wise old man" or "what's your sign." There must be millions of personality-typing systems, based on everything from skin color to eye color to universal archetypes; the time, day, or date of birth; body type or even blood type; and whether we are choleric, melancholic, Aquarius, introverted, extroverted, or something else.

Ideas for personality classifications, such as id, ego, and superego, may originate from the observations of brilliant scientists. They may come from clinical or biological or casual observation. The theories gain a hold and become part of the language until one knows what to expect from a Leo, an antisocial personality, a redhead . . . or one fixated at the oral stage of development. And these observations and classifications are often interesting and functional. They provide everyone from small children to clinical psychiatrists with a routine for classifying people, one that helps us make sense of ourselves and others.

► **CHAPTER 14**, *continued*

But that's all they do, since one system doesn't map on to the other, and thus people of different cultures, cults, eras, areas, sciences, and nonsciences have made feeble progress in developing an understanding of the self. The concept of the person can be seen to occupy a "three-dimensional space" (in the mathematical sense), and this space can be filled with almost any three independent assumptions—the vaguer, the better. Personal trouble may mean that the person is possessed by evil spirits, or that a multiple personality is acting up, or the moon is out of joint. We need an explanation to get through the day, and that is what most personality-typing systems provide.

One's own self can't be known in the way one knows one's hair color or height, or even IQ. Human beings do not have, I believe, a "true self" that they can discover by searching through their minds or their experiences. Instead, each person is a composite of the different actions and reactions that come in and out of consciousness as appropriate for any given situation.

And since it is possible to know what is "on our mind" but not what is literally inside it, direct inspection of the self will probably not lead to a true picture. There is a great deal of psychological research that shows that children don't grow up directly knowing what they are thinking. Instead, they, like all of us, make a guess, in part by observing what they are doing and in part by listening to what others say about them. Adults are also rarely able, under careful questioning, to report what is going on inside. We are simply not organized for self-knowledge, no matter how much we'd like to think we are. The mental system, instead, is geared for acting, and self-observation is very difficult.

. . . People find when they observe themselves that their reactions don't follow their preconceived ideas of who they are. They may think of themselves as orderly and serene, for example, but find, after examining their actions, that they are actually driven by excitement, that they have a constant need for stimulation, and that their emotions run the gamut from joy to despair.

QUESTIONS

1. What practical purpose does Ornstein think most personality-typing systems provide?
2. Do you believe that humans have what Ornstein calls a "true self"? Why or why not?
3. Using your own system of categorizing personality and judging from the excerpt, how would you classify the author? Why?