

Christianity and Personality: Looking Past Myers-Briggs

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“And blessed are those
Whose blood and judgment are so well commingled,
That they are not a pipe for Fortune’s finger
To sound what stop she please.”¹

Hamlet is a man paralyzed by the tumult in his soul, unable to control his powerful feelings of rage, betrayal, and sadness enough to follow through on the course of revenge he has planned; he longs to be among those more balanced in spirit. The question of what this balance actually consists of, however, is relevant far beyond the pages of Shakespeare’s magnum opus. Though the Bard is one of the most potent elucidators of the human condition, writers have noticed and commented on the duality of the human soul since the beginning of the Common Era, centuries before *Hamlet* was penned—and have continued to do so to the present day. The societal struggle to define the proper relationship between logical thought and passionate feeling within the human cognitive process is a recurring topic of discourse, one on which it seems a lasting consensus cannot be generated. Reason and emotion are often cast as opposing players in the drama of human motivation, with one or the other emphasized as more conducive to right living. The pendulum has swung back and forth throughout history—for example, the Stoics in the Roman Empire sought to achieve inner peace through the subjugation of emotion by rationality, but writers in the Renaissance and Romantic eras fought against this classical interpretation by arguing that all of man, including his mind, is ruled by the heart. Though the dialogue continues today, it has become more subdued after the cultural rise of postmodern thought, which suggests that as long as an individual is true to his or her inner self, he or she will lead a happy and fulfilling life.

Even so, why is this struggle—the subject of numerous debates, poems, and household squabbles—such a prevalent part of human history? The preoccupation arguably stems from the human capacity for contemplative self-reflection, which fosters a desire for self-understanding. There are two tiers of questions surrounding the self:

the most basic involves foundational identity, or the ubiquitous musing, “Who am I?” The second, more complex tier involves twin components: *how* the self functions and *why* it functions that way. The avenues through which people have historically pursued self-understanding are multi-faceted, but two are particularly prevalent: personality theory and spiritual exploration. Indeed, within the Christian community of 21st century America, the topic of spiritual personality has become popular. Some of the most widely used worldwide personality tests have



been incorporated into the formation of church leadership/ministry teams, and discussions abound in small groups about how God, in His divine wisdom, creates every individual uniquely and purposefully. It is thus commonly accepted that wherever an individual naturally falls on the reason-emotion continuum is where God has placed them. Yet the theological context in which this position is placed is often problematic, as is the notion of a reason-emotion “continuum.” Improper interpretations of the position give rise to several implications that are contrary to what Christianity has to say about God’s intentions for human personality and community. The most easily accessible path to explore and challenge these implications—and in doing so, re-contextualize personality within an accurate theological framework—is through the reason-emotion dichotomy, but the results of such an exploration are equally applicable to other sectors of personality. First, it is important to understand exactly what is meant by personality in society at large before addressing how that definition has,

in turn, interacted with Christianity.

Personality psychology encompasses the wide variety of theories on what exactly constitutes an individual’s interior self. Before any real treatment of personality can be given, it is crucial to note that no consensus or universal definition exists within the academic realm, although a basic assumption is common to each theory: individuals are similar in some ways, but different in others.² Beyond this fundamental postulation, several factors can contribute to a theory; dominant patterns of behavior and decision-making, expectations and preferences, reaction to social and cognitive stimuli, and self-perception are just a few major elements that can be emphasized. Generally, a

theory will account for human behavior by suggesting a framework through which these factors can be organized. However, it is one thing to be a psychological theorist who devotes years to mastering and reconciling the vast body of often contradictory conjecture surrounding personality, and another to be an individual possessing a cursory knowledge of the discipline. Within the populace, the percentage of the latter far exceeds the former, but the desire for self-understanding remains constant—not just in an esoteric sense, but also as a matter of necessity, since society is built upon organizations that are dependent on collaboration and partnership. In other words, humans cannot live and work with other humans without forming relationships, and relationships demand a level of personal understanding.

This helps to explain the popularity of personality tests, which lend people a seemingly well-rounded measure of insight into themselves without the time commitment and mental octane required to digest academic literature. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is particularly ubiquitous in the commercial world, as “eighty-nine companies out of the U.S. Fortune 100 make use of it for recruitment and selection or to help employees understand themselves or their co-workers.” It is estimated that 2.5 million Americans take the test each year³, not accounting for the various facsimiles of the test accessible on the Internet. After completing dozens of “either-or” multiple choice questions, the test-taker is given one of sixteen possible types that arises from the combination of where a person falls in each of the four bi-polar categories the test examines: Introvert-Extrovert, Sensing-Intuitive, Thinking-Feeling, and Perceiving-Judging. For example, David Keirse (creator of a test closely associated with Myers-Briggs) speculated based on observed behavior that Oprah Winfrey is an ENFJ, while Marie Curie was likely an INTP. Ultimately, the MBTI provides an easily graspable framework through which differences in personality can be viewed. If Person X is a thinker, he or she processes largely through reason, just as Person Y (a feeler) would tend towards emotional processing. The key phrase here is “tend towards.” At best, the test can only indicate which type of processing a person naturally favors—taking it as a unilateral definition would be an exercise in folly, as research shows that “as many as three quarters of test takers show a different personality type when tested again.”⁴ It is hardly a secret that humans are dynamic beings who change over time; thus, the MBTI functions well as a localized diagnostic (assuming, of course, that one has the self-clarity to answer the questions in a way that corresponds with reality).

However, the test is used as far more than a localized diagnostic by most companies, organizations, psychologists, and educators. Whether it determines aptitude for a specific job or tells an elementary school-age child how he or she learns best, the results of personality tests are rarely taken with a grain of salt; instead, they are accepted as truth. In the words of Annie Murphy Paul, “For almost a hundred years [the tests have] provided a technology, a vocabulary, and a set of ideas describing

who we are, and many Americans have adopted these as our own. The judgments of personality tests are not always imposed; often they are welcomed. And what, some will ask, is wrong with that?”⁵ The simple answer is that an approximation of truth is not a substitute for truth itself. To treat it as such is to miss the bigger, more complicated picture of the human psyche. In fact, an individual’s approximation of his or her own personality (i.e. self-perception) can be termed a psychological construct.

While many theories speculate on the avenues of construct formation, one is particularly attuned to the role of personality tests. The theory of constructive alternativism postulates that “a person’s psychological processes are channelized by the way in which he anticipates events. This is to say that human behavior is basically anticipatory rather than reactive.”⁶ In other words, it is too simplistic to say a person’s self is formed through the accumulated effects of thousands of external stimuli. Rather, the self is pre-eminently formed by how a person anticipates the future will take shape. Furthermore, an element of “response planning” is involved as an individual comes to understand herself by identifying her most likely future responses to potential events. Such anticipation is predicated on self-reflection. The

results of personality tests can thus profoundly influence the way an individual perceives her own tendencies of response. Armed with knowledge of her type, she may be drawn to self-select into certain response patterns that accord with the type, driven by an evidence-founded sense of pre-determined inevitability. Thus, over time, tendencies can come to be seen as certainties, and the personal construct is molded according to the MBTI type. To pursue other avenues of response would upset the construct, which could cause anxiety, fear, and even guilt.⁷ Person X, who understands herself as a thinker, assumes she will respond to all events, problems, and trials with logic. Person Y, the feeler, believes her response will be emotional. The unexamined construct has become one massive, repeated, self-fulfilling prophecy.

This process of construct formation, especially through personality tests, has an array of implications for the psyche, but for the purposes of discussing Christianity’s interaction with personality theory, it is also crucial to explore how the construct affects a second sector of human psychology: motivation, the pursuit of goals, and the fulfillment of needs. While behavior can be approached as construct-regulated, it can also be seen as regulated by motivation in the pursuit of goals.⁸ This framework suggests that “goals influence ongoing thought and emotional reactions in addition to behavior [and that] goals are accessible to conscious awareness, although there is no requirement that the goal be represented in consciousness while the person is in active pursuit of it.” Finally, in this context goals are defined as “objectives that a person strives to attain or avoid”, which is quite a broad statement that can be applied to both long-term pursuits and day-to-day activities. Indeed, the latter category could contain events

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that may seem positively mundane compared to what the former refers to; after all, the gulf between “be home on time for dinner” and “secure a seat in the House of Representatives” looks wide. But both objectives impact the nature of the cognitive process and require a motivational impetus to complete. Moreover, as for goals, it is not necessary for needs to be consciously represented in order to be pursued—some of these needs are ever-present in the human subconscious, compelling an individual to fulfill them. Note that needs are distinct from desires; if a desire is not met, a person may not experience a certain type of pleasure or gratification, but functionally and emotionally they will be no worse for wear. An unfulfilled need, however, is guaranteed to impact well-being.⁹

So we have goals and needs, both of which are centralities around which behavior is organized in order to facilitate the most effective pursuit of both. According to constructive alternativism, humans also organize behavior based on how they anticipate they will react to events. It can be assumed that the achievement of goals, as a process fixed within the temporality of human existence, consists of a series of successive events, which opens up the possibility for an integrated theory of personality that incorporates both constructive alternativism and goal-oriented behavior: personal constructs become the anticipatory methodology through which humans pursue goals and fulfill needs. This integration has distinct ramifications for the Christian faith, in which a relationship with God is both the ultimate goal and the deepest need.

This is where the thinker-feeler dichotomy comes into play, for according to the philosophy behind the MBTI and other tests, individuals are fundamentally locked into favoring one over the other. Moreover, this “favoring” implies an opposite-poled axis of trust; if a person trusts reason, he or she will naturally have an equivalent distrust of emotion, or vice versa. Yet this seems to be an inherently broken psychological set-up, as the presence of both needs and goals in the human psyche implies the necessity of *both* emotion and reason in the human cognitive process. Since it is characteristic of needs that they are felt (as opposed to thought), they are closely intertwined with emotions. Indeed, some needs are primarily emotional, including the needs for security, for goodness, for beauty, and to love and be loved.¹⁰ The satisfaction of such needs is necessary for inner peace and full mental health. The definition of goals is broader, for several goals that humans pursue have no emotional attachments, but require reason and logic to carry out. More importantly, however, reason is a certifier; it legitimizes actions and beliefs based on objective principles, a solid foundation that filters the instability that can arise from the subjectivity of emotions. Clearly, both reason and emotion have inherent value, and the ideal construct would incorporate both in order to fulfill the broadest possible spectrum of both needs and goals. But, as Shakespeare notes, such a harmonious

synthesis is rarely observed, so much so that the individuals that exhibit it can truly be called “blessed.”

As alluded to above, because God endowed mankind with both reason and emotion, it follows that His creatures cannot truly flourish in life without both. Moreover, since all truth is contained within God, it is impossible to fully *know* God (i.e. be in relationship with Him) without both emotion and reason, just as human relationships require both to function with stability. Indeed, God created earthly reality good,¹¹ and his first human creations, Adam and Eve, were no exception—until their disobedience released sin upon creation. Thus, one of the many tragedies of the Fall is that the proper intercourse between reason and emotion no longer comes naturally to mankind—and what’s more, society sees the two as largely incompatible at best, enemies at worst. However, that is not meant to be the end of the story. By sending His Son to die for the sins of humanity, God facilitated the road to redemption for creation, beginning with His Son’s own resurrection. Thus humanity is able to live in relationship with God once again, and dwelling in that relationship engenders a growth and transformation of the mind and soul.¹² Thus, ideally, an individual who

has entered into a restorative relationship with God commits to surrendering all aspects of their life—including the personal construct—to God, Who begins to mold the individual, psyche and all, according to His perfect vision of who He created him or her to be.

It is at this critical juncture that misconceptions about the nature of personality among the Christian community, both at an individual and collective level, can impact the realization of this redemption. As stated before, the MBTI functions well as a current, localized diagnostic of an individual’s leanings in personality, assuming

she answers in a way that corresponds with reality, but treating it as both infallible and fixed often leads the individual to reduce her capacities by anticipating that she will respond to events in certain ways. When the test’s bipolar categories are emphasized in group settings, this same attitude can be extended to a larger scale: individuals not only restrict themselves, they also believe that whatever capacities the test prescribes for their peers are unalterable as well.

This ultimately fosters a community that is defined solely by the differences of its members, which counters the formation of cohesive relationships because it does not generally promote finding common ground. When reason and emotion are cast as enemies at war, the best that can be hoped for is a *reconciliation*: the enemies lay down their arms and call a truce. Yet a community that is predicated on a premise of difference has already begun to move away from reconciliation, instead functioning as a collection of closed systems; individuals have no checks in place to prevent their constructs from becoming restricted to one side of the dichotomy, which in turn limits the range of goals that can be fulfilled, needs that can be met, and ultimately, truth that can be known. C.S. Lewis, in his treatise on education,

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Abolition of Man, noticed a manifestation of this problem occurring in contemporary school systems in the form of instructors teaching “the belief that all emotions aroused by local association are in themselves contrary to reason and contemptible [...] [the instructors] have cut out of [the student’s] soul, long before he is old enough to choose, the possibility of having certain experiences which thinkers of more authority than they have held to be generous, fruitful, and humane.”¹³ Despite his own commitment to knowledge and education, Lewis feared that the loss of emotion in the youth of his era would result in stunted growth of the new generation’s mental capacities for creativity and morality, and his address was directed equally at secular and religious audiences. For the believer in God, the stakes are even higher: whether emotion or reason is the missing element, the individual is ultimately robbed of the ability to know God in His entirety. No price is more costly.

But what did Lewis think caused this loss of emotion? Simply put, the instructors had failed to understand reason and emotion as *complimentary*—as different approaches to the same body of truth. The problem thus lies with how the relationship between the two is contextualized. They are not diametric opposites; instead, ideally, they work together to push an individual towards truth and the ultimate joy of life. This completely contradicts the messages of unavoidable tension that personality tests transmit throughout society. Yet, because these messages are so ingrained within the societal mindset, it is hard to imagine what this improved situation even looks like. Indeed, the mindset itself may, at its root, be an inescapable result of the fallen world. Though people can indeed be redeemed and transformed by a relationship with Christ, the reality of brokenness continues to pervade this existence and will do so for every individual until he or she fully enters God’s presence in heaven. But this does not mean that humans cannot move towards this complementary understanding of reason and emotion while still on earth, for Christ’s work within the human soul is essential for moving that soul to final completion. Therefore, the work’s importance cannot be understated, and it is through that work that we begin—however fleetingly—to glimpse God’s original design for the human psyche as a tool for understanding our lives. What is one way in which Christ enacts this work? The answer lies within a Christian community in which the members are tied together through fundamental kinship: God uses a sharing of life experiences on the corporate level to engender a complimentary perspective on the individual level.

It is not surprising that community is a significant restorative avenue of Christ’s work, for God created us not only to be in relationship with Him, but also with each other.¹⁴ Indeed, God intends His children to share life with each other through mutual teaching and experience, for not only does God create people purposefully, He creates them in His image—mankind reflects God’s nature, both individually and corporately. The real intention and beauty behind Christian community, thus, is the collective imaging of God that arises only when the church comes together in relationship; a dimension of God is reflected that is not seen through the individual’s own power, but instead becomes apparent when he or she is joined with his or her brothers and sisters in Christ. This sharing allows God to use people

as conduits for His truth in one another’s lives by providing living, breathing demonstrations of the various way in which He can be sought. When one Christian is brought to understand how another relates to God, he or she is invited to share in that relationship, and that period of time spent dwelling with God in the presence of another leaves him or her with a new layer of kinesthetic perspective that colors behavior, mental functioning, and spiritual life. Community, thus, is used by God to enrich the lives of each member and move His children closer towards both Himself and His ultimate vision for their lives. These two results of God’s transformative work are simply not the focus of the MBTI, or any other such personality tests. The information such tests provide can definitely be useful, but according to Scripture, an individual’s identity in Christ is preeminent. Perhaps it is these individuals who Hamlet speaks of: people who do not appear preoccupied with defining themselves at present, but instead look to their Creator in eager expectation of who they will become.

1 *Hamlet* III, ii, 62-66

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5 Paul xiv-xv

6 George Kelly, *The Psychology of Personal Constructs: Clinical Diagnosis and Psychotherapy* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 3

7 Kelly 7

8 Robert A. Emmons, *The Psychology of Ultimate Concerns: Motivation and Spirituality in Personality* (New York: Guilford, 1999) 22-23

9 Clifford Williams, *Existential Reasons for Belief in God: A Defense of Desires and Emotions for Faith* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011) 27-28

10 Williams 21-27

11 Genesis 1:31

12 Romans 2:12

13 C.S. Lewis, *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002) 471

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