The Ultimate Theory of Personality

Personality Theories

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Introduction

After a semester of Personality theories – Freud and Jung and Rogers and Frankl and Bandura and Eysenck, etc., etc., etc. – students often ask, once again, isn't there **one** theory we can trust and use with confidence? Can't we narrow it down a bit? Tell us, what is right and what is not!

Well, unfortunately, Personality is not yet a science, at least not in the sense that Biology or Chemistry are sciences. In those fields, although there is disagreement about details and the latest findings, there is a common body of knowledge that few people in the field argue about. Not so, obviously, in Personality.

However, there are slowly emerging ideas that seem to pop up again and again in different theories, often with different names, but there none-the-less. Sometimes they occur in theories that are otherwise quite different, or that come from a different perspective, such as clinical versus experimental versus factor analysis versus phenomenological. Perhaps the field will indeed become a science, perhaps not too far in the future!

I know I'm excited!

So, I have taken the bull by the cojones, so to speak, and have compiled this little list of things I see as being, if not universal, at least more likely features of the future ultimate theory of personality. Here goes...

Consciousness and the unconscious

This, of course, is Freud's greatest contribution. Even if he didn't invent the terms, he certainly was responsible for popularizing them! Many theories postulate some sort of unconscious, not as a place where our worst fears bubble and boil, but as a way of accounting for the many things that influence us without our full awareness.

We can pick out three aspects of the unconscious.

> The first is **biological**. We come into this life with something like Freud's **id** or Jung's **collective unconscious** in place. It is likely composed of whatever **instincts** remain a part of our human nature, plus our **temperament** or inborn personality, and perhaps the preprogramming for **stages** of life. This biological unconscious overlaps in part with the existentialist concept of **thrownness**.
>
> > As for possible instincts, I would nominate four "complexes" of them: A **mating** complex, an **assertive** complex, a **social** complex, and a **nurturant** complex.
>
> Second, there is the **social unconscious** (as Fromm calls it), which actually resembles Freud's **superego** more than Freud's id. It might include our language, social taboos, cultural habits, and so on. It includes all the cultural things we were surrounded with in our childhood and have learned so well that they have become "second nature" to us! The negative aspects of the social unconscious overlaps with the existential idea of **fallenness** and with Rogers' idea of **conditions of worth**.
>
> And third, there is the **personal unconscious** (to borrow Jung's term), perhaps understood as the unconscious aspect of the ego. It is composed of our idiosyncratic **habits**, the more personal things we have learned so well we no longer need to be conscious of them in order to enact them – like knowing how to drive so well that we can comb our hair, talk on a cell phone, light a cigarette, and notice the attractive person in the rear view mirror all at the same time (at least until you run off the road into a tree).

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> Included among those well-learned things might be the **defense mechanisms**. With these we ignore, with habitual efficiency, uncomfortable realities in order to save our sense of self-worth. More a little later....

But let's not get overly enthusiastic about the unconscious! Few psychologists today view it as the location of our true selves, the answer to all our problems, or some deep psychic well that connects us with the universe or God! It is where the more-or-less automatic processes of instinct and the well-learned do their thing.

All this is in contrast to (in fact defined in contrast to) **consciousness** or awareness. Other than instincts and (perhaps) a few associations learned by classical conditioning, it seems that all things going into or out of our psyches pass through awareness.

What consciousness is will be a question for a good while longer. It's not terribly available to traditional research methods! But for now, we can see it as the ability to experience reality (outer and inner) together with its meaning or relevance to ourselves (as biological, social, and even individual organisms). Phew! I would add that it may be consciousness that also provides us with the freedom to choose among the choices available to us – i.e. **free will** or at least **self-determination**.

> Perhaps the most important thing to keep in mind about consciousness is that it is **personal**. It is yours and yours alone. And it is within this personal consciousness that all of your "psychology" takes place. Everything you feel, perceive, think, and do is based on your **subjective** view of reality, which may be significantly different from mine! Therefore, in order to understand people, we need to understand them from the inside. This little fact is what makes psychology so much more difficult than the physical sciences!

Stages

Stages are something most personality theorists shy away from. Freud and Erikson are the obvious exceptions, as is the developmentalist Piaget. And yet there is a very biological basis for the idea. We can, on pure biology, separate out at least three stages: the **fetus**, the **child**, and the **adult**. This is, in fact, completely parallel to the egg, caterpillar, butterfly example we learned in high school biology!

In addition, we can see three **transitional** stages: **infancy**, **adolescence**, and **senescence**.

> **Infancy** is not, actually, found in more primitive animals, and is greatly exaggerated in humans. We are, in a sense, all born prematurely. Perhaps this was the result of an evolutionary dilemma: How can an upright creature give birth to a baby with a large head without killing the mom? That's right: Give birth before it gets too big!
>
> > What that does for us is more than just let us live long enough to give birth again. It lets the infant soak up information much earlier, and in a different way. It would seem that for the first 6 to 12 months, our neural development is as yet incomplete. As we learn, we actually create certain neural paths, rather than just tightening synapses as we do later in life. It's a little like learning instincts!
>
> **Adolescence** also qualifies, I believe, as a stage. The transition from child to adult involves rather massive hormonal changes accompanied by a growth spurt like you hadn't seen since you were two! It is hard for me to conceive of these changes not having some effect on us psychologically.
>
> **Senescence** is, strictly speaking, the last year or so of a full life, during which time the organs begin

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to deteriorate and shut down. We don't usually see this as a stage, and in fact most people never reach it (accidents and diseases usually beat senescence to the punch). But socially speaking, in our culture we certainly prepare ourselves for this inevitability, and that might constitute a social stage, if not a biological one.

As this last point suggests, there are certainly cultural additions we can make. In our culture, there is a sharp transition from preschool child to school child, and another sharp transition from single adult to married adult. For all the power of biology, these social stages can be every bit as powerful.

To venture a guess as to the psychological side of these biological stages:

> The fetus focuses on **biological development**, which is transformed by the presence of others in the infant into **ego development** in the child.
> In turn, the ego development of the child is transformed by the advent of sexuality in adolescence into the "trans-ego" or **social development** of the adult.

Another way I look at it is this:

> In the fetal and infancy stages, we lay the groundwork and develop our **temperaments** (founded in hormones and neurotransmitters).
> In the child stage, we develop a **personality** (founded in habits).
> In adolescence, continuing into adulthood, we develop **character** (based on conscious decision-making).

Temperament

Temperament is what we call that part of our personalities or characters that is built–in to us genetically. Consequentially, although there is always a degree of flexibility allowed, to a large extent we "are" our temperaments for our whole lives. Temperament is very "in" right now, and justifiably so. Jung led the way, Eysenck made it more scientifically acceptable, and the Big Five made it official.

Nearly everyone I know of accepts two dimensions of personality as established before birth, probably genetically:

- **emotional stability** (AKA neuroticism...) and
- **extraversion-introversion** (AKA sociability, surgency...).

Three more seem to have popular approval:

- **conscientiousness** (AKA anality, judging-perceiving...),
- **agreeableness** (AKA warmth, feeling-thinking...), and
- **openness** (AKA culture, intuiting-sensing...).

And there are three other contenders harder to place:

- **psychoticism** (Eysenck),
- **activity** (Buss and Plomin), and perhaps
- **impulsivity** (Buss and Plomin).

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Learning

With the exception of Skinner, Bandura, Kelly, and a few others, learning is rather taken for granted by most personality theorists. But I suspect it shouldn't be. We can postulate at least three kinds of learning: **environmental**, **social**, and **verbal**.

Environmental learning includes the behaviorist Pavlovian and Skinnerian **conditioning**, of course – getting feedback from your environment. It also includes the **latent learning** that E. C. Tolman talked about: We learn about our environment just by being in it!

George Kelly's way of looking at basic learning derives from the work of Snygg and Combs, which in turn derives from the Gestalt psychologists: We learn to **differentiate** one thing from another on the basis of the consequences. Either way, behaviorist or gestalt, this kind of learning requires little in the way of consciousness.

There is also environmental learning that involves other people. When junior does something that mom or dad does not approve of – he may be **punished** in some fashion. Likewise, he may be **rewarded** when he does something right for a change. This is also usually called conditioning, but the fact that it involves others means it is also social learning, and so fraught with extra difficulties.

For example, if every time your run into a tree your head hurts, you will stop running into the tree. On the other hand, if every time you say "shit!" your dad hits you upside the head, you may stop... or you may avoid dad, say shit under your breath, begin to hate your father and authority in general, start beating up little kids after school, and so on, until prison effectively stops the behavior. These kind of things seldom happen with trees.

Social learning includes **vicarious learning** (noticing and recalling the kinds of environmental feedback and social conditioning other people get) and **imitation** (Bandura's **modeling**). This kind of learning is probably the most significant for the development of personality. It can be either conscious, as when we are watching an artist to learn their technique, or unconscious, as when we grow up to be disconcertingly like our parents.

And there's **verbal learning** – learning not from the environment or the behavior of others, but from words. Culturally, this is, of course, a highly significant form of learning. Most of the learning we do in our many many years of schooling is verbal. And yet we don't know that much about it at all!

Emotions

Emotions or feelings have always been a key point of interest in personality theories. At the lowest level, we have **pain** and **pleasure**, which are really more like sensations than feelings. There is also psychological pain and pleasure – call them **distress** and **delight** – which may be the root of all other emotions. Distress is what we feel when the events of the world are more than we can handle. Delight is what we feel when we discover that we can handle them after all!

Anxiety is a favorite topic in personality theories. Although many definitions have been proposed for anxiety, they tend to revolve around unnecessary or inappropriate fear. Kelly notes that it is actually

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the anticipation of a fearful situation, accurately or not. **Fear**, in turn, is usually understood as involving the perception of imminent harm, physical or psychological. These definitions serve well for most circumstances.

Guilt is another key emotion. Related to **shame**, it is usually understood as the feelings aroused when one contravenes internalized social rules. Kelly provides a useful elaboration: He defines it as the feeling we get when we contravene our own self-definition (which may or may not involve those standard social rules!). Existentialists add another detail by suggesting that guilt is closely related to the sense of **regret**, of opportunities not taken.

Sadness is the experience of the world not being as it should be, with the added notion that we have no power to alter the situation. Instead, there is a need to alter ourselves – something we are innately reluctant to do! **Grief** would be the obvious extreme example, and **depression** could be defined as unrealistic sadness that continues long after the original situation.

Anger is similar to sadness: The world is not as it should be. But now, there's the added notion that we must energize ourselves to change the situation. When we act on our anger, it becomes **aggression**. Anger and aggression are not necessarily bad: It is our anger at social injustices, for example, and aggressive action to correct them, that makes for positive social change! Unrealistic anger, the kind we hang on to despite the suffering it causes us and the people around us, could be labelled **hostility**.

There are, of course, many other emotions and emotional shadings we could try to define, but that's for another time and place. Just one more thing should be noted: It appears that, where there is consciousness, there is emotion – at very least an emotional tone or mood. As the existentialists point out, we just cannot not care.

Motivation

Now here's a more difficult one: Motivation is central to most theories of personality, and the variety seems unending! But perhaps a little organization will help.

First, there are the **biological motivations**, mostly instinctual (although addictions are acquired). There is our need for air, water, food. There is the need for pain-avoidance. There is the need for pleasure: pleasant touch, comforting, sex. We may want to add the **instinct** complexes mentioned earlier: mating, assertiveness, nurturance. All theories accept these, although they differ wildly about their importance relative to each other as well as to other kinds of motivation.

Second, there are the **social motivations**. They may build on the biological motivations, especially the instinct complexes, but they vary enormously depending upon culture and even individual social situations and learning. Because they are so well and early learned, we could borrow Maslow's term and call them **instinctoid**. Social motivation includes the need for acceptance, attention, and approval (Rogers' **positive regard**), as well as those forms of self-esteem that are based on such approval.

Third, there are the more **personal motivations**, ones that are based on the experiences of the individual, especially our habits (good and bad), those nasty defense mechanisms (see below), and our personality "styles."

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Last, but not least, there are **higher motivations**. These are conscious and we perceive them as providing our lives with meaning. There appear to be two broad kinds:

> The first, **competence motivation**, includes such motives as desire to learn, attain competence and mastery, even the desire to be creative. Adler would call it **striving for perfection**.
>
> The second, **altruistic motivation**, includes Adler's **social concern**, compassion, love. Erikson in particular talks about these two motives in the adult stages. Whether they are simply derivatives of the lower needs or are indeed something more, will remain a point of discussion for many years into the future!

It seems to me that all of the preceding, and probably a few I've missed, qualify as motivations. Disagreements as to which are most significant are perhaps misguided – perhaps that differs from individual to individual! And the possibility that higher motivations derive from lower ones in no way diminishes their significance. Rollo May's idea of a large number of **daimons**, unique to each individual, may be the best approach.

All these various motivations could be summed up in one word: **actualization**. Actualization is a concept found in most of the great theories. Rogers, of course, uses it. Jung and Horney use it in the form **self-realization**. It means, very literally, turning potentials in to actualities. It means (following Snygg and Combs) "maintaining and enhancing the organism." Survive and thrive! Live long and prosper! The life-force! That's why we eat and drink, make love and raise our infants, build communities and defend them, create new things and love each other. Perhaps the term actualization, being so general, does not add to our scientific understanding of personality. But I think the concept helps to clarify our fundamental nature!

Neurosis

Many people's difficulties begin with childhood experiences of abuse, neglect, poverty, sickness, parent's sicknesses or death, parental psychological problems, divorce, immigration, accidents, deformities, etc. Sometimes, we are strong enough, or have enough support, to weather these storms. More often, we find that these experiences leave us with an on-going apprehension about life. We end up suffering from anxiety, guilt, sadness, anger... not just as a direct result of the specific experience, but because we no longer trust life.

A child with loving parents and compassionate relations, peers, and teachers may well be able to cope with these problems. On the other hand, a lack of support, a lack of what Rogers calls **positive regard,** can leave even a child blessed with a comfortable environment troubled with self-doubt and insecurity.

Many of our theories were developed in order to help those who cannot cope, and looking at Adler, Horney, Rogers, Bandura, and others, we find a great deal of agreement as to the details. As I said a moment ago, in order to cope with life's difficulties, we need positive regard – a little love, approval, respect, attention.... But others often make that love and approval **conditional** upon meeting certain standards, not all of which we can meet. Over time, we learn to judge ourselves by those standards. It is this **incongruence** (Rogers' term) between what we need and what we allow ourselves that leaves us with **low self-esteem**, or what others call a **poor self-concept** or an **inferiority complex**.

There is a real advantage to the idea of inferiority over self-esteem: It is rare to have an overall sense of low self-esteem. Instead, most people have a sense of inferiority in some domains and not in others. Acknowledging the specificity of inferiority allows us to focus in on possible remedies, while just saying someone suffers from low self-esteem leaves us with little sense of where to start!

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Confronted with the difficulties of life, lacking in the support of others, and not even enjoying confidence in ourselves, we find we must defend ourselves however we can. We can list a large number of **defense mechanisms**, as Anna Freud did, or we might be able to simplify a little, like Carl Rogers: We defend our sensitive egos by **denial** and **repression**, and by **distortion** and **rationalization**.

> **Denial and repression** attempt to block the offending experiences directly, from the environment and memory respectively, at the cost of emotional exhaustion. Denial applies to information from outside ourselves, repression to the things we already know (way down inside).
>
> **Distortion and rationalization** are more sophisticated and less exhausting and deal with the offending information by working around it. Distortion is the manipulation of information from the outside, rationalization is the manipulation of information we already own.

Either way, they are lies we tell ourselves and others in order to minimize the impact of that incongruence between our need for love and security and what is afforded to us. We use these lies because they help, actually. But they only help in the short run: Over time, they lead us into a possibly serious misunderstanding of how the world (especially other people) works, and of who, in fact, we are.

For those people who are, perhaps, a bit stronger, we still find suffering in the form of **alienation**. There develops a split between the deeper, "truer" self within, and the **persona** (to borrow Jung's term) that we present to the outside world to attempt to meet with those "conditions of worth" that Rogers talks about. We feel **inauthentic**, false, phony, dishonest on the one hand, and misunderstood or unappreciated on the other. Over the long haul, this is likely to lead to depression and withdrawal from social life. But sometimes, alienation can lead to new perspectives on life and some remarkably creative insights. Perhaps we owe a good portion of our art, music, and literature to these same people.

At the other end of the spectrum are those people whose psychological suffering is founded on physiological problems. Schizophrenia, although it certainly has some sizable social and psychological causes, seems to have a considerable physiological component. Other disorders, such as bipolar, major depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorders, improve with the use of medications that enhance the effects of our own neurotransmitters. The borderline between psychology and physiology is becoming increasingly blurry!

Coping strategies

People troubled by neuroses will be also find themselves attracted to certain patterns of living that to one degree or another keep the psychological pain at bay: They may become alcoholics, or work-aholics, or sex addicts, or they may become obsessed with cleanliness or physical health, etc. These patterns can involve unusual behaviors, emotional attachments, obsessive thoughts, etc. Binswanger calls these patterns **themes** and they are similar to Horney's **neurotic needs**, Ellis's **irrational beliefs**, and the behaviorists' **maladaptive habits**.

Many theorists see a certain order among these themes, and classify them into four or five categories, which Horney calls **coping strategies**. Fromm calls them **orientations**, Freud uses **character types**.... They are, perhaps, the result of an interaction between a person's temperament and the specific stressors they must deal with.

There are two coping strategies we can readily agree upon: a **dependent style** and an **aggressive style**.

> The **dependent style** is characterized by a sense of inferiority and weakness, but also involves a strong – perhaps desperate – use of manipulation of others. It is also referred to as **oral passive**,

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getting or **leaning**, **compliant**, and **receptive**.

The **aggressive style** is characterized by aggressive posturing that serves to temporarily diminish a sense of inferiority – i.e. the superiority complex! When you feel bad about yourself, beat or humiliate someone else. This is also known as **oral aggressive**, **ruling** or **dominant**, and **exploitative**.

From there, things get more uncertain.

A third candidate is the **perfectionist** style. This type of person attempts to actually reach the excessively difficult standards they have accepted for themselves – or at least pretend to reach them. They tend to be emotionally detached from others, and to dislike depending on them. It is also known as the **anal retentive** or **hoarding** type.

A fourth candidate is the **schizoid style**, AKA, the **avoiding**, or **withdrawing** type. This kind of person attempts to remove him- or herself from most if not all social interaction. They tend to be somber, psychologically detached, angry at the whole world, and potentially violent.

And a last, fifth candidate is the **infantile style**, AKA, the **phallic**, or **marketing** style. These people avoid responsibility by essentially extending their childhoods into adulthood. They are obsessed with youth, fun, adventure, and even high risk activities. They tend to be shallow and hedonistic.

One could argue that the most common coping strategy of all – most common because it works so well – is **conventionality**, "busy-ness," getting lost in the day-to-day. It will be up to future personality researchers to determine which of these are true styles, if the idea of a few styles holds up, or if we should stick to a more individualistic way of describing people's coping.

Therapy

It is somewhat surprising that, for all the variation in theories, there is considerable agreement regarding therapy.

First, there is an emphasis on **self-awareness** or, as Freud put it, making the unconscious conscious. We encourage our clients to understand their biological, social, and personal unconscious and related motivations, to examine the conflicts between their needs and the standards society and they themselves impose, and to look behind their defensive posturings.

We are also taught to encourage our clients to discover more **conscious**, **higher motivations** – meaning the development of competence, creativity, and compassion, becoming valuable to oneself and to others....

And the means of therapy? We are taught to use genuinely **caring dialog**, and to provide **support** (not management or control) with a goal of eventual **autonomy** for the client.

Now, each theory has its own set of preferred techniques. Some, such as the radical behaviorist approach, insist that techniques are all you need. Others, such as Rogers' approach, suggest that you don't need techniques at all, just an empathic, respectful, and honest personal presence. Probably the majority of therapists, however, follow the middle path and use a few techniques that they have found useful and that fit their clients' and their own personalities.

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In addition, we now have a fairly reliable set of **drugs** that appear to help. Our understanding of the physiological bases for psychological problems has been growing rapidly, and, while that understanding is far from complete, it has allowed us to help people more effectively. Most therapists are still hesitant to rely entirely on medications, and rightly so. But these medications certainly seem to help in emergency situations and for those whose suffering just doesn't respond to our talk therapies.

Balance

Another common theme in Personality theories is the idea of **balance**. Freud, for example, felt that all of life's "crises" were best resolved at some midpoint between two extremes – Potty training was to be accomplished not too early, not too late, not too harshly, not too leniently. The result of a balanced upbringing would be a balanced personality – not too retentive, not too expulsive, for example.

Even when talking about positive experiences, such as learning to act on our imaginations, we need to recognize that those positive experiences need to be tempered with at least a small amount of negative experiences: Without a little shame and self-doubt, Erikson tells us, acting on our imaginations becomes ruthlessness.

[It now appears that a little red wine or a couple of cups of coffee are not only not harmful, but actually beneficial!]

Carl Jung's entire theory revolves around balance, between **anima** and **animus** and between the **ego** and the **unconscious**. The former in particular has received a great deal of attention and empirical support: **Androgenous** people (those who combine qualities of both the "feminine" and the "masculine") appear to be mentally healthier.

The balancing act that seems to have gotten the most attention from personality psychologists is the one that originated with Otto Rank's contrast between our desire for both "**life**" and "**death**," as well as our fears of these same forces. I like the terms **individuality** and **community**. Rollo May uses the words **will** and **love**, others words such as **autonomy** and **homonymy**, **agency** and **communion**, **egoism** and **altruism**, and so on.

Whatever the words, the balance to be achieved is between the impulse to serve oneself and become all one can be and the impulse to serve others and become one with the universe. But serve only yourself, and you end up alone; serve only others, and you lose your identity. Instead, one must serve oneself in order to serve others well, and serve others in order to best serve oneself.

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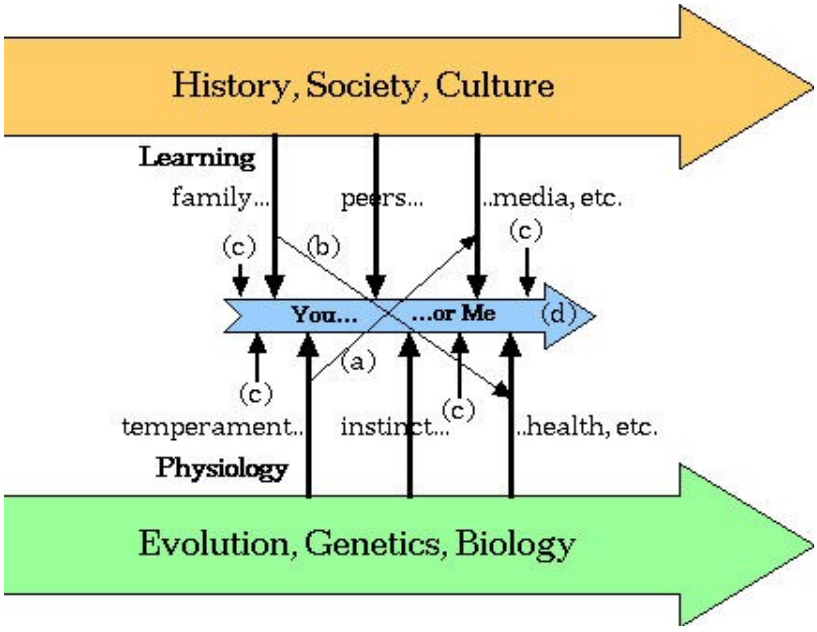
Conclusions

Even among our list of consistencies, we can find some "**metaconsistencies**." Being a visual sort, I like to put things into graphic form. So here goes:



What you see here is "poor me" (or "poor you"), at the center of enormous forces. At top, we have **history, society, and culture**, which influence us primarily through our learning as mediated by our families, peers, the media, and so on. At the bottom, we have **evolution, genetics, and biology**, which influence us by means of our physiology (including neurotransmitters, hormones, etc.) Some of the specifics most relevant to psychology are instincts, temperaments, and health. As the nice, thick arrows indicate, these two mighty forces influence us strongly and continuously, from conception to death, and sometimes threaten to tear us apart.

> There is, of course, nothing simple about these influences. If you will notice the thin arrows (a) and (b). These illustrate some of the more roundabout ways in which biology influences our learning, or society influences our physiology. The arrow labeled (a) might represent an aggressive temperament leading to a violent response to certain media messages that leads to a misunderstanding of those messages. Or (b) might represent being raised with a certain set of nutritional habits that lead to a physiological deficiency in later life. There are endless complexities.
>
> I also put in a number of little arrows, marked (c). These represent **accidental influences**, physiological or experiential. Not everything that happens in our environment is part of some great historical or evolutionary movement! Sometimes, stuff just happens. You can be in the wrong place at the wrong time, or the right place at the right time: Hear some great speaker that changes the direction of your life away from the traditional path, or have a cell hit by stray radiation in just the wrong way.

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> Last, but not least, there's (d), which represents **our own choices**. Even if free will ultimately does not stand up to philosophical or psychological analysis, we can at least talk about the idea of self-determination, i.e. the idea that, beyond society and biology and accident, sometimes my behavior and experience is caused by... me!

Perhaps there is more agreement than I originally thought! This bodes well for our field. Perhaps we can get through the next so many years intact, and arrive, somewhere in the twenty-first century, at full scientific status. I do hope so, although I also hope that Personality continues to be a bit of an art as well. I choose to believe that people will always be a bit harder to predict and control than your average green goo in a test tube!

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