

# PERSONALITY

A PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

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**PERSONALITY**  
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*To my Mother*

## PREFACE

As a rule, science regards the individual as a mere bothersome accident. Psychology, too, ordinarily treats him as something to be brushed aside so the main business of accounting for the uniformity of events can get under way. The result is that on all sides we see psychologists enthusiastically at work upon a somewhat shadowy portrait entitled "the generalized human mind." Though serving well a certain purpose, this portrait is not altogether satisfying to those who compare it with the living individual models from which it is drawn. It seems unreal and esoteric, devoid of locus, self-consciousness, and organic unity—all essential characteristics of the minds we know.

With the intention of supplementing this abstract portrait by one that is more life-like, a new movement within psychological science has gradually grown up. It attempts in a variety of ways and from many points of view to depict and account for the manifest individuality of mind. This new movement has come to be known (in America) as the *psychology of personality*. Especially within the past fifteen years has its progress been notable.

Since it is young, this movement finds difficulty in evaluating its first achievements. Its research is plentiful but piecemeal; its theories are numerous but conflicting. Yet every year more and more psychological investigators are attracted to it, and colleges at a rapid rate are adding the study of personality to their psychological curricula. The result of this rising tide of interest is an insistent demand for a guide book that will *define* the new field of study—one that will articulate its objectives, formulate its standards, and test the progress made thus far.

In attempting to write such a book I have sought above all else to respect the many-sidedness of the subject-matter of this new science. An account written exclusively in terms of any single school of psychological doctrine would be far too narrow. Better to expand and re-fashion one's theories until they do some measure of justice to the richness and dignity of human personality, than to clip and compress personality until it fits one closed system of thought.

In striving for adequacy and balance I have tried to make a special ally of common sense which, I believe, affords precisely the hypotheses and insights that it is the duty of the new psychology of personality to verify and (if possible) improve. I have likewise borrowed liberally from many types of psychological writing, past and present. But whatever I have appropriated I have tried to assimilate within a single and coherent theoretical frame.

This goal of adequacy means, of course, that I cannot accept whole-heartedly each and every partisan point of view. The endocrinological approach, for example, is a specialty with many enthusiastic supporters. So too is psychoanalysis. Their danger is their one-sidedness, their monosymptomatic bias. Though I borrow from these approaches I cannot subscribe to them as adequate.

Similar is the case of the currently popular statistical methodologies. Many believe these are indispensable in supplying the factual ground for the science of personality. Sometimes they are useful; but many times they are not. In any event, mere arrays of statistics are never capable of self-interpretation. It is for this reason that I have preferred in most cases to state the results of research as clearly as possible in words, proceeding at once with the interpretation of the results. If the argument is sound, statistics can do no more than symbolize the fact; if the argument is unsound, statistical elaboration can never make it sound and may even increase the confusion. So, at a time when in many quarters mathematical symbolizing enjoys exaggerated favor, I prefer for clarity's sake to stick to the verbal method of exposition and argument, especially since it seems to me the only one wherewith to co-ordinate the field as a whole.

From another direction I may be called to task for overlooking the close relationship between personality and culture. But such criticism can arise only from a misunderstanding of my purpose. I do not deny that personality is fashioned to a large extent through the impact of culture upon the individual. But the interest of psychology is not in the factors *shaping* personality, rather in personality *itself* as a developing structure. From this point of view culture is relevant only when it has become *interiorized* within the person as a set of personal ideals, attitudes, and traits. Likewise, culture conflict must become *inner* conflict before it can have any significance for personality. Why is it that in our times, when Western culture is sadly disorganized, our personalities are not correspondingly disorganized? The enthusiastic determinist might reply: "They are. Our institutional

anchors are lost and each of us is either drifting or breaking to pieces." But such a reply would be wholly unrealistic. Are personalities in fact any more disorganized now than formerly? Is there any sure evidence for an increase of insanity? It is doubtful. Certainly, it is impossible to hold that disorganization of personality today is *proportional* to the rapid shattering of cultural forms. Cultural determinism is one of the monosymptomatic approaches; it has a blind spot for the internal balancing factors and structural tenacity within personality.

There is also in some departments of social science a tendency to define personality as one man's influence upon others, as his status in the group, or as his "social stimulus-value." With such definitions psychology cannot possibly operate. If it tried to do so its datum would evaporate, and there would be left only the notoriously conflicting images that men have of one another. The psychology of personality must regard its subject-matter as wholly objective and accessible. To be sure, the task of judging personality correctly, of reading motives aright, and of representing adequately the change and variation of which each person is capable, complicate the study enormously, but still a stable biophysical frame of reference must be assumed.

Psychologically considered the important fact about personality is its relatively enduring and unique organization. The central problem of the psychology of personality therefore concerns the nature of this structure and its composition in terms of sub-structures or units. The elements and bonds sponsored by traditional psychology do not serve as adequate means for depicting the structure of individuality. Part III devotes itself entirely to this question, and it is here that the chief novelty of my own position lies. Chapters 11 and 12 on *traits*, especially if taken in conjunction with Chapter 7 on the autonomy of motives, supply, I believe, a theory that is concretely applicable to the infinitely varied forms of personal existence, and at the same time abstract enough to serve as a unifying principle for the new branch of science.

To sum up, my purpose is twofold: (1) to gather into a single comprehensive survey the most important fruits of the psychological study of personality, and (2) to supply new co-ordinating concepts and theories where they will equip this new department of psychology for a more adequate handling of its endlessly rich subject-matter.

The beginnings of this book lay in certain researches I undertook

seventeen years ago. Ever since that time it has been in the process of development and completion. From start to finish my constant and loyal collaborator has been Ada L. Allport, my wife. The material has been presented many times in my classes. Through their interest, discussion, and willing participation in experiments my students have contributed to its final content and form more than they know. In certain chapters I have benefited much from the advice and assistance of my friends, H. D. Spoerl, C. E. MacGill, D. M. McGregor, R. P. Casey, C. M. Harsh, and H. Werner. Especially deep is my indebtedness to my brother, F. H. Allport, for significant help with some of the crucial portions of the argument, and to Hadley Cantril who has carefully read and criticized the entire manuscript. I wish also to acknowledge the kind assistance of R. T. Fuller in drawing the illustrations, and of Miss Dorothy Telfer in preparing the manuscript for publication.

G. W. A.

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*Part I*

THE APPROACH TO PERSONALITY



## CHAPTER I

# PSYCHOLOGY AND THE STUDY OF INDIVIDUALITY

Die Natur scheint Alles auf Individualität angelegt zu haben.

—Goethe

THE outstanding characteristic of man is his individuality. He is a unique creation of the forces of nature. Separated spatially from all other men he behaves throughout his own particular span of life in his own distinctive fashion. It is not upon the cell nor upon the single organ, nor upon the group, nor upon the species that nature has centered her most lavish concern, but rather upon the integral organization of life processes into the amazingly stable and self-contained system of the individual living creature.

In daily life, in our direct contacts with our fellows, the pre-eminence of individuality is recognized readily enough. During our waking hours and in our dreams people appear to us as definite and individual. The man in the street is never in danger of forgetting that individuality is the supreme characteristic of human nature. It seems to him self-evident. But with the scientist the case is different. Of the several sciences devoted to the study of life-processes, none, peculiarly enough, recognizes as its central fact that life processes actually occur only in unified, complex, individual forms. Sciences find the very existence of the individual somewhat of an embarrassment and are disturbed by his intrusion into their domains. They pretend to deal with Nature, but are oblivious to the fact that Nature, as Goethe said, seems to have planned everything with a view to individuality.

### SCIENCE AND THE SINGLE CASE:

*"Scientia non est Individuorum"*

Why is it that science and common sense part company over the fact of human individuality? The answer is that science is an arbitrary creed. It defines itself as a systematic attempt to trace order in nature through the discovery of regularities and uniformities *characteristic*

of a *whole class* of objects. By choice, therefore, scientists have pre-occupied themselves with generalized truth, with occurrences that are common to events of one class. A "class," to be sure, is a question-begging concept, for it in turn is an abstraction designed to cover common occurrences. So it turns out that the "order in nature" which the scientist seeks is after all quite a circular matter.

The order that is manifested in the single organism through the inter-relation of its bodily and mental processes is overlooked; it is not considered to be of legitimate scientific concern. The individual is regarded only as an *instance* or *example* of a universal principle; the search is always for broader and more inclusive formulations. "A description of one individual without reference to others may be a piece of literature, a biography or novel. But science? No." <sup>1</sup> *Scientia non est individuorum*.

There is a typical procedure the scientist feels compelled by convention to follow. He starts always with a certain professional attitude toward nature. The fact that this attitude is only one of many kinds of attitude of which he is capable, demonstrates at the outset a certain arbitrariness in his method of study. First, he makes a critical discrimination of his subject matter, isolating from the individual who confronts him a chosen segment of behavior. This procedure is termed *abstraction*. He then observes the recurrence of this segment and its conditions in many members of a hypothetical class. Finding uniformity in the event and its attendant conditions, he makes a *generalization* or a law, and then, if he is a thorough investigator, he will submit his law to repeated tests and so establish it securely by *empirical verification*.<sup>2</sup>

The discovery of a law by this procedure is like finding a single thread running from individual nature to individual nature, visible only through the magical spectacles of a special, theoretic attitude. In everyday life, the scientist, like anyone else, deals effectively with his fellow men only by recognizing that their peculiar natures are not adequately represented in his discovery. The single functions which they have in common are deeply overshadowed by the individual use to which they put these functions. The piling of law upon law does not in the slightest degree account for the pattern of indi-

<sup>1</sup> M. Meyer, *Psychol. Bull.*, 1926, 23, p. 271.

<sup>2</sup> These stages of scientific labor are described repeatedly in treatises on the scientific method; see, for example, A. Wolf, *Essentials of the Scientific Method*, 1925.



viduality which each human being enfolds. The *person* who is a unique and never-repeated phenomenon evades the traditional scientific approach at every step. In fact, the more science advances, the less do its discoveries resemble the individual life with its patent continuities, mobility, and reciprocal penetration of functions. -

Starting with an infinitely more complex subject-matter than the other biological sciences, but with the same presuppositions, the psychologist has isolated his fragmentary elements, has generalized and verified his findings in the manner of the austere elder sciences. He has succeeded in discovering orderly processes in the "generalized mind," but the phenomenon of individuality, so deliberately excluded, returns to haunt him. Whether he delimits his science as the study of the mind, the soul, of behavior, purpose, consciousness, or human nature,—the persistent, indestructible fact of organization in terms of individuality is always present. To abstract a generalized human mind from a population of active, prepossessing, well-knit persons is a feat of questionable value. The generalized human mind is entirely mythical; it lacks the most essential characteristics of mind,—locus, organic quality, reciprocal action of parts, and self-consciousness.

This exclusion of the individual from pure psychology has led to many anomalies. It has, for example, often been pointed out that the psychologist, in spite of his profession, is not a superior judge of people. He should be, but his ascetic and meager formulae derived from "generalized mind" do not go far in accounting for the peculiar richness and uniqueness of minds that are organic and single. The study of psychological laws is not sufficient training for the comprehension of personal forms of mental life. Science is commonly considered to give men control over nature, but in the psychological field there is no "generalized mind" to be controlled. There are only single, concrete minds, each one of which presents problems peculiar to itself. In ordinary life we deal with our acquaintances, not by applying abstract laws, but by studying their individual natures.

Still, with considerable tenacity, psychologists have held to convention, abstracting from minds initially organized such properties as suit their convenience, and their convenience is determined largely by scientific tradition. They are absorbed by the shadow of Method rather than by the individual objects upon which the shadow lies. To take a single example, the method of paired-comparison recommends itself as an objective and quantitative technique for studying judgments of the affective value of colors. In order to employ it the