

THE RETURN OF THE EMPTY ORGANISM

The Cult of Personality

**How Personality Tests Are Leading Us to Miseducate Our Children,
Mismanage Our Companies, and Misunderstand Ourselves**

Annie Murphy Paul

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Reviewed by Kevin Lamb

Over the decades skeptics, Marxists, and assorted egalitarian critics have repeatedly attacked the concept of psychological testing. Their arguments, often grounded on misconceptions and ignorance, maintain that such tests are flawed and inadequately sort individuals in a dubious process according to ability levels and personality differences. All the while since the early 1900s, teams of diligent psychologists have pursued the task of refining the validity and utility of IQ and personality tests. Defining, measuring, and differentiating the dimensions of personality and establishing and refining differences in intelligence are solid achievements that have benefited society. Refinements in psychological testing have produced proven results for educators, clinicians, and personnel administrators in the public and private sector.

This methodological triumph remains one of psychology's more successful endeavors, as corporate managers and business executives have discovered over the years. Ability testing is a crucial part of the selection process for the United States armed forces. Each recruit must score proficiently on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery to be accepted by the various branches of the U.S. military. The composite score in four areas serves as the Armed Forces Qualifying Test score cutoff point in recruit selection. Like the Pentagon, private employers rely on the efficiency (competence and effectiveness) of their employees. Identifying personality and ability strengths of a prospective hire provides useful information for employers, who seek to minimize turnover rates and profit losses.

The demands of maintaining a highly efficient and profitable enterprise in order to compete for market share in an increasingly competitive economy have turned the process of personnel hiring, managerial selection, and promotion into an annual \$400 million bonanza for the testing industry. More and more employers are using refined personality tests for personnel selection. The fact that such tests (when properly administered) enable administrators to recruit and promote individuals better suited for their own corporate demands is evidence of their utility. (In hiring window-washers for skyscrapers or pilots for commercial airlines, common sense dictates screening out applicants who suffer from acrophobia or who all too easily encounter motion sickness.)

A national restaurant chain recently experienced declining annual profits, which were suspected of being indirectly tied to personnel issues. The chain implemented one of the more reliable personality tests for screening applicants, and within a relatively short period the company became more profitable. One corporate spokesman told the testing firm that using the test to decipher potential staff problems was one of the best-kept secrets within the industry. By efficiently selecting abler and more reliable employees with the availability of dependable personality profiles, helping achieve a lower average turnover rate, the test enabled the company to edge out competitors.

A few years ago this reviewer participated in a management workshop at the request of a former employer. Every Friday for ten or eleven weeks a room full of mid-level managers (employed by our parent company) gathered over a light breakfast, catered lunch, and mid-afternoon coffee break with desert for simulated managerial exercises. The exercises illustrated how different individuals approached divergent tasks and handled various work-related projects from the vantage point of their unique personality types. Each participant in the workshop was required to take the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). The results of the questionnaire served as the basis for simulated workplace demands that teased out, among other things, different approaches that each of us employed in working through some task or problem. More importantly, the hands-on training enabled each participant to recognize *differences* among colleagues and staff in order to utilize and constructively channel these differences to meet goals and accomplish tasks more efficiently as well as to minimize staff conflict and problems. The failure to properly employ the differing degrees of talent, skill level, and experience within a corporation (matching pegs to round holes and blocks to square holes) can thwart productivity and spawn a host of personnel problems.

By routinely ignoring personality differences in personnel selection (hiring an extreme introvert for a sales position), corporate executives and directors can easily foster unnecessary problems in the workplace, particularly when the added elements of inexperience and incompetence at various corporate *levels* are factored in. The signs of these festering personnel problems become clear for an organization once mediocrity begins to define product output.

Stagnation-creep eventually sets in (goals and projects remain unfinished for indefinite periods), especially if the leadership drifts along, often simultaneously rowing in different directions, as the enterprise sinks into the murky waters of organizational neglect, ineptitude, and sometimes blatant corruption.

The creation of highly refined psychological tests, although no flawless panacea, has been one of the more practical contributions of psychologists to society. The measurement of individual talent and abilities and the capacity to identify and examine the sources of human *differences* have enabled society to advance in profoundly beneficial ways. Consider the important relationship of science and technology in driving progressive societal change. The inventions of the transistor and personal computer have transformed nearly every sector of society, yet these inventions would not have been possible without the intelligence and creativity of geniuses. That society's ongoing advancement is dependent on the ranks of a creative elite, an issue the late author Nathaniel Weyl studied extensively, is beyond question.

Carpers, however, still abound. One such critic is Annie Murphy Paul, author of *The Cult of Personality*. The essence of Paul's critique of personality testing reflects her radical egalitarian assumptions about human nature—put simply, that there are no innate “tendencies” or “proclivities” toward certain patterns of behavior. Personality is explained as too complex to accurately measure. Thus personality tests are said to lack comprehensive precision and to fail to properly evaluate and predict individual behavior and to assess unique qualities that only real world experience can determine. Personalities are too individual and the factor of individual experience is simply too multifaceted to be pigeonholed by some formulaic treatment. Traits are too narrowly constructed and too rigid to capture all the dimensions of personality. The essence of personality differences is chiefly revealed in situations. Credible alternatives have discredited trait theories of personality, and so on and so forth. In many ways, Paul's treatment of the subject is predictable and her emphasis on “heroes” and “villains” in recounting her selective narrative of personality research is unavoidable, given her perspective. She simply projects her own views through the prism of skeptical dissent, drawing on critics of trait theory to raise general objections in a narrative that seeks to cast into disrepute major innovators in the personality research field.

Paul, a graduate of Yale and a former senior editor at *Psychology Today*, received the 1999–2000 Rosalyn Carter Mental Health Journalism Fellowship and currently writes a monthly “mind/body” column for *Shape* magazine. Currently a graduate student studying for a master's degree in journalism at Columbia, by her career choice Paul offers a window on her outlook: one that is unquestionably liberal and conventionally egalitarian. One wonders: Is Paul a psychologist pursuing a career in journalism, or a prospective journalist seeking to enhance her psychology background? Does she consider herself first and foremost a psychologist or a journalist?

Although *The Cult of Personality* has been hailed in the mass media and publishing circles as a “daring original work” based on “relentlessly thorough” research, some experts in the field of personality research, including Peter Geyer, teacher, author, and expert on the MBTI, have found that her broadsides rest on exaggerations, erroneous claims, innuendo, anecdote, and subjective assessments rather than valid empirical assessments. Most of the book is loaded with anecdotes and innuendo in a story-telling narrative that focuses on the purported quirks and eccentricities of the inventors of some of the most widely used personality tests.

Of all the individuals that Paul focuses on, none better epitomizes the stereotypic mad scientist than Raymond Cattell. Paul depicts Cattell, late distinguished research professor of psychology at the University of Illinois and author of more than five hundred research papers and fifty books, as a “stranger” in that most of his colleagues and research associates remained “ignorant” of his controversial philosophical views. Paul suggests that Cattell’s writings were “abstruse” and “little understood” by most psychologists. However, Cattell’s colleagues within his field, personality and ability research, have described him as one of the twentieth century’s most influential behavioral scientists. A survey of psychologists in 1975 ranked Cattell eleventh overall among the most influential psychologists, living or dead. Three separate festschrifts have highlighted Cattell’s contributions to psychological research. He received numerous awards over the course of his lifetime despite a controversy in 1997 that induced the American Psychological Association to abandon plans to confer on Cattell one of its most prestigious awards for lifetime scientific achievement. (The episode was largely manufactured by Marxist critics, such as Berry Mehler.) Paul treats the APA controversy as a point of departure in assessing Cattell’s philosophical beliefs, which, according to Paul, “would also lead him disturbingly, even dangerously, astray.” Cattell’s ultimate transgression, in Paul’s view, is that he remained a committed eugenicist and advocate of Darwinian principles applied to man’s moral, physical, and mental development. He outlined what he considered a “religion from science,” which he called “Beyondism,” in two separate volumes. Cattell simply attempted to formulate ethical principles which would be compatible with scientific progress. He basically views natural selection and competition at the cultural and group level as a healthy way for societies to advance. Cattell defended the concept of eugenics as an important process in catapulting man’s evolutionary status and enhancing human qualities.

Paul describes Cattell as a determined and driven researcher, an ambitious workaholic who put his work and professional pursuits above his family and friends. He was known to have worked on Christmas and other days on which most other researchers would take time off. Even during recreational activities with friends and associates he would periodically lapse into mental concentration on some aspect of his work. Supposedly, Cattell would shorten

rounds of golf to get back to his office. Such devotion, in Paul's mind, is less an indication of praiseworthy dedication to one's work than a sign of an imbalanced dogmatist desperately rationalizing a science of human nature from pure logic. Paul writes, "his philosophy was informed not by hot-tempered prejudice but by something more chilling: an unwavering devotion to the cool logic of science, no matter what the human cost."

The author highlights Cattell's life and views in similar fashion in a span of sixteen pages to distort the contributions of one of the most original and productive minds in contemporary behavioral science research. Cattell's major indiscretion was a violation of contemporary taboos; he was guided by sound research instincts and applied himself to the search for truth about differences in personality and ability. This mission Paul seeks to demean – with unintended accuracy – as an "unyielding commitment to rationality...."

The Cult of Personality evinces tell-tale shortcomings that indicate that the author's knowledge of the field of personality research is superficial at best, that she knows less than she lets on, and that she deliberately limits her focus to selective generalizations and descriptions that allow for easy distortion. For example, the chapter on Cattell includes a discussion of the "five-factor model of personality" developed by Paul Costa Jr. and Robert McCrae, a major trait-theory that rivals Cattell's sixteen personality factor (16pf). Paul summarizes the "big five" theory with a skeptical description that attributes certain assumptions to Costa and McCrae. The discussion of Costa and McCrae is not an intrinsic exploration of whether their theory is more valid than Cattell's sixteen personality factor; rather this competing theory is brought up merely to suggest a lack of consensus on the part of trait theorists. What is interesting is that nowhere in this chapter or in the entire book is there any mention of Hans Eysenck and his voluminous work in developing a three-dimensional trait theory of personality. Nor is there any mention of the standard textbook *Personality Traits*, by Gerald Matthews and Ian Deary, which offers a more balanced overview of personality traits, their origins and development, from two of the field's leading researchers. In fact there is a good reason why the author deliberately avoids any discussion of Matthews and Deary or any substantive mention of contemporary experts in the field. Her quest isn't a search for truth about core personality issues, but an extended condemnation of the idea that *differences* in human characteristics can be accurately identified, measured, and evaluated, and that society should not take cognizance of such *differences* for some utilitarian end.

Paul emphasizes Walter Mischel's 1968 "situational" critique of trait theory "as an earthquake [that] hit personality psychology." She describes Mischel's book *Personality and Assessment* as one that had "an utterly devastating impact." If the uncritical reader accepted her contention at face value, one would have to conclude that research on personality psychology ended in 1968. Consider the following critique of Mischel from Matthews and Deary:

There is a straightforward criticism of Mischel's (1968) situationist critique, and his claim that traits are unable to predict much of the variance in a given situation. If we examine, say, Eysenck's (e.g., 1969) trait theory, we see that accurate prediction in a single given situation is not the basis for Eysenck's model (see figure 2.1). It is only after observing an individual in many situations that we form impressions about their habitual response patterns, which we intuitively correlate to produce trait-like impressions. Other trait theorists such as Allport (1961) and Cattell (1983) have stated explicitly that any given trait may fail to predict behavior in a single situation; it is only by behavioral aggregation that we can make trait claims. Thus the situationist claim that traits could neither predict nor be inferred from individual situations, attacks a straw man (Epstein, 1977).¹

Much of Paul's case rests upon straw-man arguments such as the one Matthews and Deary describe above, which any informed individual can cut through like cottage cheese. The author's criticism of personality research contains very little sustained examination of important issues that confront contemporary researchers. Many of her points seem locked into a time-warp (Mischel's work was viewed differently in 1968 than it is now), which one suspects is a way to rationalize her own anti-personality agenda. Again, consider Matthews and Deary's following point:

Later work by Mischel has in fact made use of trait constructs to predict behaviors with remarkable success. As might be expected, he uses behavioral dispositions in a particular way – one that takes the context into account and may be seen as a form of interactionism (Wright and Mischel, 1987). As an alternative to theories which see traits as causal agents or as mere summaries of observed behaviors (e.g., Buss and Craik, 1983), Mischel sees a trait statement as the “conditional probability of a category of behaviors given a category of contexts.” It is hard to imagine any trait theorist taking exception to this definition, and the present authors consider it to be a good mainstream definition of a trait, stripped of beliefs about the origin of the trait.²

Another distortion is Paul's description of the work of another pioneering psychologist: Gordon Allport. Even though the Harvard psychologist is credited with being a founder of personality psychology, a pioneer in trait theory, and a leading influence on Raymond Cattell, Paul describes Allport as one out of the “mainstream” of his profession, a skeptic of “measurement” and the “search for universal laws,” and one who found “little in American personality psychology that met his approval.” She applauds his “life story” approach as a way to comprehensively grasp the real-life, individual experience of human existence. Her depiction of Allport is limited to a narrow interpretation of his overall perspective on personality development.

In a 1966 address to the American Psychological Association, Allport revisited the concept of personality traits. Much of what he articulated herein seems to contradict Paul's brief depiction of Allport's views.

Some critics have challenged the whole concept of trait.... The resulting postulate of the “empty organism” is by now familiar to us all, and is the scientific credo of some. Carried to its logical extreme this reasoning would scrap the concept of personality itself—an eventuality that seems merely absurd to me....

Skepticism is likewise reflected in many investigations of “person perception.” To try to discover the traits residing within a personality is regarded as either naïve or impossible. Studies, therefore, concentrate only on the *process* of perceiving or judging, and reject the problem of validating the perception and judgment. (Cf. Tagiuri & Petrullo, 1958.)

Studies too numerous to list have ascribed chief variance in behavior to situational factors, leaving only a mild residue to be accounted for in terms of idiosyncratic attitudes and traits.... It is not the integrated structure within the skin that determines behavior, but membership in a group, the person’s assigned roles—in short, the prevailing situation. It is especially the sociologists and anthropologists who have this preference for explanations in terms of the “outside structure” rather than the “inside structure” (cf. F. H. Allport, 1955, Ch. 21).

I have mentioned only a few of the many varieties of situationism that flourish today. While not denying any of the evidence adduced I would point to their common error of interpretation. If a child is a hellion at home, an angel outside, he obviously has two contradictory tendencies in his nature, or perhaps a deeper genotype that would explain the opposing phenotypes. If in studies of person perception the process turns out to be complex and subtle, still there would be no perception at all unless there were something out there to perceive and judge. If, as in Stouffer’s studies, soldiers’ opinions vary with their marital status or length of service, these opinions are still their own. The fact that my age, sex, social status help form my outlook on life does not change the fact that the outlook is a functioning part of me. Demography deals with distal forces—personality with proximal forces.... Whatever tendencies exist reside in a person, for a person is the sole possessor of the energy that leads to action. Admittedly different situations elicit differing tendencies from my repertoire. I do not perspire except in the heat, nor shiver except in the cold; but the outside temperature is not the mechanism of perspiring or shivering. My capacities and my tendencies lie within....

The powerful contributions of Thurstone, Guilford, Cattell, and Eysenck, based on factor analysis, agree that the search for traits should provide eventually a satisfactory taxonomy of personality and of its hierarchical structure. The witness of these and other thoughtful writers helps us withstand the pessimistic attacks of positivism and situationism.³

Ironically enough, Paul’s chapter detailing what she describes as Kenneth Clark’s valiant efforts to rectify societal injustice with the use of his dubious “doll test” in the *Brown v Board of Education* case, which purportedly showed that black children suffered from low self-esteem as a result of societal pressures associated with the lingering impact of segregation, treats Clark as a coura-

geous psychologist, a dignified individual who, unlike the other psychologists in Paul's sights, happens to be perfectly normal as an upstanding individual. The fact that leading social scientists, such as Ernest van den Haag, exposed major flaws in Clark's doll studies is a peripheral footnote, an inconvenience that has little if any consequences for the author. These critical social scientists, who testified for the defense and found little empirical evidence to substantiate Clark's theories about segregation's harmful impact on black children, may have been technically correct but for the wrong reasons. However, Clark's work was faulty for all the right reasons. Paul seems to tread lightly as to whether such flimsy social scientific experiments deserve "a place at all in public affairs, especially the courts." She gingerly applauds Clark for his resolve to fight racism, "...in the face of prejudice, he became more ambitious, more industrious, more certain of his goals." If one works to erase societal prejudices, then being "ambitious," "industrious," and "devoted" to one's career is laudable; if one seeks to discover core personality traits and the sources of personality differences, then one is pegged as a deranged "workaholic" — a "stranger" with sinister motivations, concealed from his colleagues, who seeks to philosophically justify personality stereotypes. It seems quite clear, given the anomalies in her treatment of Clark, whom she avoids casting any aspersions upon, and the criticism directed against psychologists with far more standing in the field, that her assessment is driven more by ideological leanings than by some objective commitment to the truth.

What explains Paul's inconsistency in her laudatory portrayal of Clark, whose use of a nonstandardized test was heavily criticized by leading social scientists, such as Henry Garrett, the former chairman of the Columbia University psychology department and former president of the American Psychological Association, and her treatment of psychologists who devised valid, well-constructed personality tests? Paul admits that "Clark's critics were justified in their claim that the doll tests suffered from serious weaknesses, a fact that even his supporters eventually came to acknowledge." Nonetheless, she portrays Clark's efforts as on the side of the angels: "...in this case, psychology supported the weak against the strong, the minority against the majority."

In relying on the use of personality tests, Paul claims that individuals and institutions in society are making decisions — who should take custody of a child, who should get a job, which students should advance in college admissions — based on discredited and faulty information. The underlying reason that egalitarians such as Paul object to the use of personality tests isn't so much the issues of test construction, validity, or reliability, but the idea that people really do *differ* in terms of personality and ability and such differences clash with a radical egalitarian perspective of humanity. Egalitarians consider such differences as a result of social forces; that people are fundamentally alike irrespective of one's genetic makeup, ancestry, sex, or social status. Consider the use of tests in today's labor force.

Workplace efficiency, in terms of maximizing ability, skill level, and experience, has been transformed over the years due, in part, to the grip of egalitarianism as a force for change throughout Western societies. The United States federal government required typists and secretaries to take a typing test, but eventually their use was discontinued because this testing requirement penalized applicants who couldn't type well. The test results, which sorted out fast typists from slower ones, produced consequences that were deemed "discriminatory," considering the lopsided racial outcome among the applicant pool. Testing experts referred to this phenomenon as "disparate impact." Egalitarians viewed this as unfair since it judged, sorted, and ranked people on the quality of their typing and excluded applicants who couldn't meet the typing standards for certain positions.

Popular books such as Paul's are written for the egalitarian literati in the salons of Boston and Manhattan, which seek to reinforce a politically correct view of human nature as an empty organism, or what is more commonly viewed as a blank-slate personality. Paul seems driven to put social causes before truth when it comes to the issue of personality testing. The best that the educated layman can do is to ignore such popular rubbish and go directly to the source material.

ENDNOTES

1. Gerald Matthews and Ian J. Deary, *Personality Traits*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 40.
2. *Ibid*, p. 43.
3. Gordon W. Allport, *The Person in Psychology: Selected Essays*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1968, pp. 44-48.