

## [09] Personality

### Key Concepts

- State vs Trait vs Character
- Five factor theory
- Psychoanalytical theory

### A. Introduction

Type 1 thinking not only predisposes us to think in terms of categories, it pushes us to treat those categories as real and substantive—hence as enduring, inevitable and effectively unchanging. Since thinking is a costly business and time is at a premium we use, in addition, whatever short cuts we can—leading, among other things, to the many cognitive biases identified by Kahneman and Tversky. Nowhere are such propensities stronger than when it comes to assessing other people. Recognize a person's personality—so say these parts of our mind—and we know what to expect (and what not to expect) and can move on to other things.

Vast amounts of time, effort and money have been spent investigating personality scientifically. We now know that (for instance) if we study alcoholics we will find they share many qualities of character—but we also know that there are no personality types that allow us to predict that a particular person will become, in future, an alcoholic. There are many features of temperament which appear to be quite stable—show them in infancy and you'll almost surely show them as an adult. But Kagan's work on shyness showed unequivocally that extrapolating from such predispositions to the personality of an adult is a fraught business, and the ability of personality tests to tell us what people will do when they find themselves in extraordinarily situations is very limited indeed.

### B. Questions to Guide Your (Re)Search

[1] Bearing in mind that ordinary people tend to use terms like, 'he's that sort of person', or 'she's like that' rather than referring to an individual's personality, how often do people make judgments about other people's personalities in everyday life?

[2] Are there particular circumstances or situations where people are more likely to make such judgments?

[3] As is often the case, the fact that people make judgments is often revealed when they make errors. When, where and how are people likely to make such mistakes? Is there a particular kind of error they generally make under such circumstances?

[4] Determining a person's personality would seem to enable us to predict what they will do in the future. How well do ideas about personality work in everyday life? How well do they work to explain people's behavior in situations that are *not* like everyday life—in emergencies or crises, for instance?

[5] When things go wrong—a policeman kills an innocent person or a politician takes a bribe—explanations based on the character or personality of the people involved typically dominate (this is an instance of the Fundamental Attribution Error). How accurate are such explanations? How well do they inform us about what sorts of things need to be done to stop such things from happening again?