

MBTI: ROOTS UNEARTHED

Introduction

The Myers Briggs Temperament Indicator (MBTI) is used in over 10,000 companies, 2,500 colleges and universities and 200 USA government agencies. As well, tens of thousands of coaches and consultants hold MBTI certification. It's been administered to about 50 million people since the 1960s, which is about 1 million annually. While not an immense number, this is a disproportionately influential user base.

Yet academics and psychologists continue to disparage MBTI as a '*sacred cow*' with '*cult status*'. "It's about belief much more than scientific evidence," says Adam Grant, a professor of industrial psychology at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School. Professor Grant is concerned by "*the cultlike devotion of many consultants and practitioners to do it without the examination of the evidence.*" This concern is echoed by Brian Little a Cambridge professor of psychology. "*To raise questions about [Myers-Briggs's] reliability and validity is like commenting on the tastiness of communion wine. Or how good a yarmulke is at protecting your head.*" "*It's like religion. Believe what you want. Get out of it what you want*" notes Barry Edwards, a senior training manager at government contractor CACI. Professor Grant decries "*the taboos about MBTI in academia – don't praise it – and in corporate America – don't criticize it. One "can't poke a hole in their sacred cow."*" "*There is almost a 'rite de passage' to taking the Myers-Briggs, and it's becoming a very symbolic thing,*" says Professor Little.

This critical language is loaded with spiritual terminology i.e. *rite of passage, faith, devotion, communion, cult, and sacred cow*. Why so? What is it about MBTI that provokes this particular criticism? Let's examine what lies beneath this charged dichotomy and debate. In doing so, we will unearth the primal roots from which MBTI has sprung and is still nurtured.

Universal Need

Humans share a universal need for meaning and affiliation. Throughout the ages, diverse cultures have created models to help better understand each other and where we stand in the circle of life. The Mandala in India and the Medicine Wheel on the North American high plains are notable examples. Both are heuristic 'discovery' tools innovated by societies with highly holistic worldviews.

The ancients found particular inspiration in observing nature. For example, a model of personality based on the four elements was developed 5000 years ago in Egypt and Mesopotamia. These four elements are also generally illustrated in a circle as well.



2500 years ago, the Greeks formalized these older concepts and methods. They paired each element with a corresponding human character trait: *Fire - Choleric, Air - Sanguine,*

Water - Melancholic, and Earth – Phlegmatic. Empedocles called the elements the “four roots”. He and his peers believed both the world and humans were a mix of these four roots, or *rhizomata*. Indeed, they were called the “Fourfold Roots of Everything” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empedocles>). The Romans referred to it as the Quaterni, meaning “Four At Once.” DaVinci’s drawing of the Vitruvian Man perfectly illustrates this concept.



Psychological Assessment Tool

These ideas continued to guide Western medical and psychological thinking. In the 18th Century, with the Enlightenment, the model was supplanted by newer scientific thinking. However in the 1920s, the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung revitalized and modernized the concept of the four-fold temperament model. This was based on his extensive original research into ancient Greek philosophy and medieval alchemy. Jung reframed the elements as psychological functions. He called these *sensation, feeling, intuition, and thinking*.

Since then, hundreds if not thousands of psychometric assessment tools have been created freely borrowing Jung’s four-fold model. The Myers Briggs Temperament Indicator is a well-known example. It generates \$20 million annually. A competing product, equally successful, is DISC. John Wiley & Sons recently acquired it for \$85 million dollars.

Four Fold Model

Simply put, this ancient ‘four-fold’ model of temperament is “*arguably the oldest of all personality profiling systems, and it is fascinating that there are so many echoes of these ancient ideas found in modern psychology*” (<http://www.odportal.com/personality/four-temperaments.htm>). Carl Jung essentially demystified the four primal elements by relabeling them as psychological functions. Katharine Briggs and Isabel Myers went further with MBTI. That is they reduced these functions to eight sets of four letter formulas for different types. The following Table illustrates.

Myers Briggs	Ancient Character Trait	Element
ISTP, ISFP	Sanguine	Air
ISTJ, ISFJ	Melancholic	Earth
INTJ, INTP	Choleric	Fire
INFJ, INFP	Phlegmatic	Water

Critics use religious terms to frame their concerns, I think, because they see this energetic mystical worldview underpinning the MBTI model. MBTI proponents appear to prefer seeing their product as a wholly scientific resource. Ironically the critics are right

about MBTIs but for the wrong reasons. There is a profound relation between our inner elemental states and the greater world we inhabit.

"In *"Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water as Environmental Ideas"*, Dr. David Macauley observes *"the four elements – water, air, earth, and fire – have exercised an enormous, if often unnoticed, impact on the Occidental imagination."* His book is a *"powerful invitation for philosophical regrouping and lyrical reflection about basic elemental principles that are critical to living wisely and well on planet Earth today"* (2011).

The poet Octavio Paz described the world as *"A conspiracy of elements all moved by universal sympathy."* Gaston Bachelard, the French philosopher, believed our archetypal affinity with the four elements is revealed as a form of poetic truth. *"This adoption of the 'elements' is archetypal, a product of what Jung called 'the natural mind' that derives from natural sources and offers a natural wisdom"* [Octavio Paz, a study of his poetics, by Jason Wilson]. Furthermore, in her book, *The Imaginal Energy of Earth*, Dr. Stroud suggests the environmental crisis is *"the result of a societal lack of deep self-awareness ... In other words it is a crisis of unconsciousness."*

The ancient Romans believed *Harmonia* was the result of *"Four At Once"*. For the First Peoples of North America, *Mother Earth* is the *Medicine Wheel* or *Sacred Hoop*. She is the ultimate symbol of *Harmonious Relationship*. As the elder Pauline Shirt Dodem Kanosha' suggests: *"What we have to do is teach all the four colours so we can work together, all peoples, in a good way"*.

Hopefully, practitioners may look at MBTI with new eyes. That is to see how much of its value remains rooted in ancient wisdom still relevant today. Similarly MBTI critics might want to reflect on where their own hidden roots may lie. The last stanza of T.S. Eliot's classic poem about the four elements is a fitting conclusion.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

References: Paragraphs 1 & 2

Myers-Briggs: Does it pay to know your type?

http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-leadership/myers-briggs-does-it-pay-to-know-your-type/2012/12/14/eaed51ae-3fcc-11e2-bca3-aadc9b7e29c5_story.html

Say Goodbye to MBTI, the Fad That Won't Die

<http://www.linkedin.com/today/post/article/20130917155206-69244073-say-goodbye-to-mbti-the-fad-that-won-t-die>